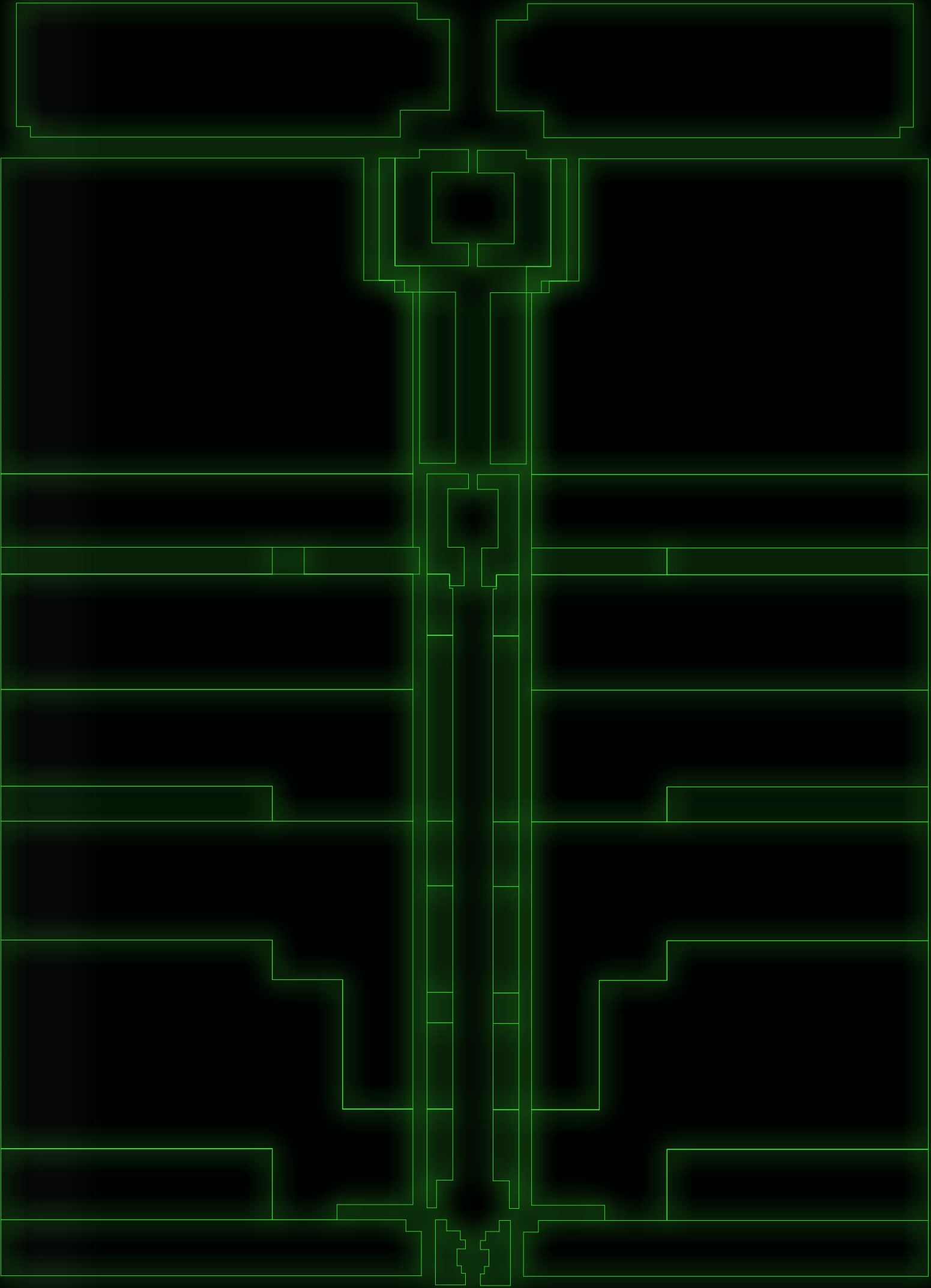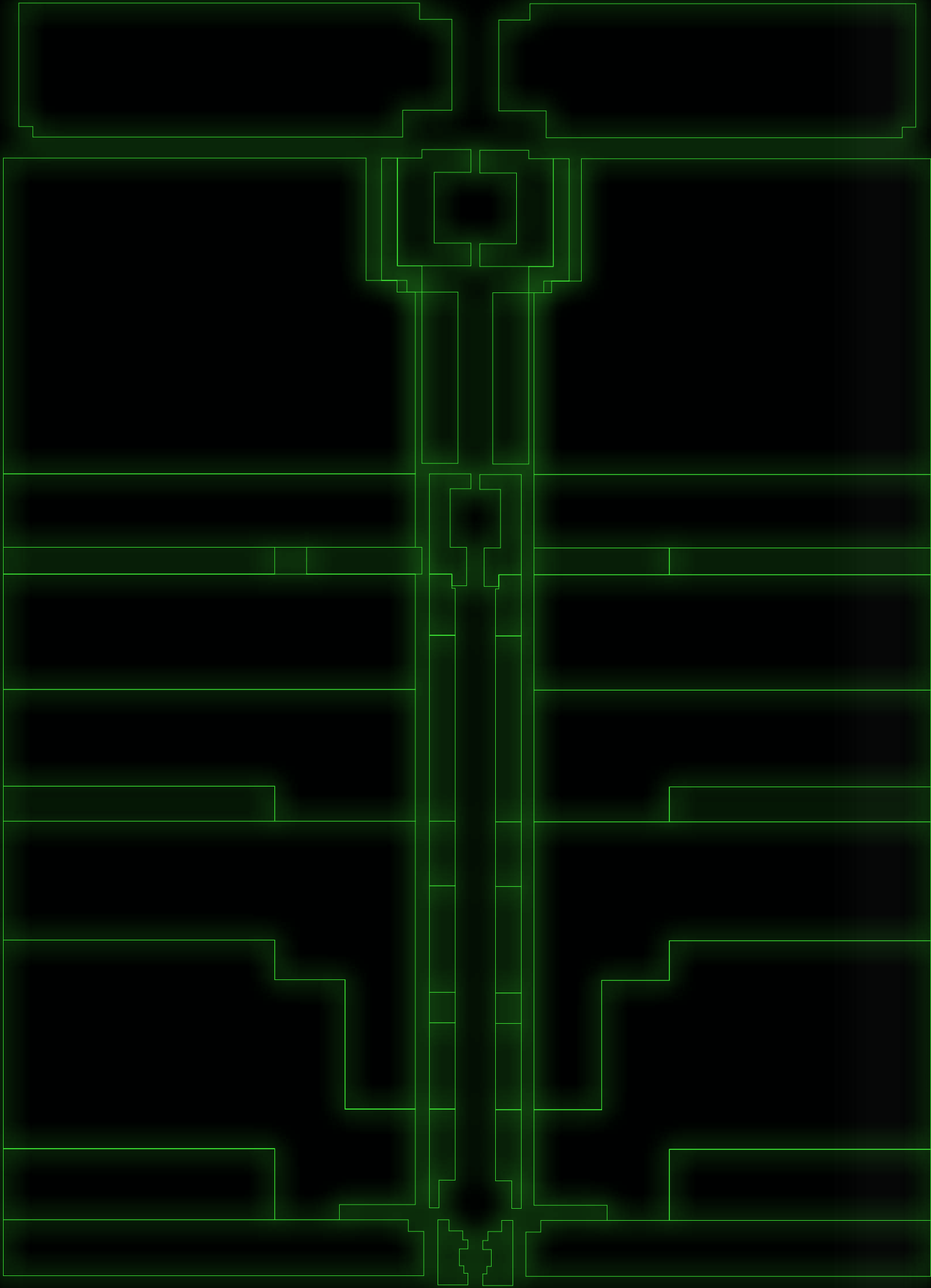# ANCIENT HYPER PRESENT

A VIRTUAL
MATERIALIZATION
OF THE INWARD LANDSCAPE
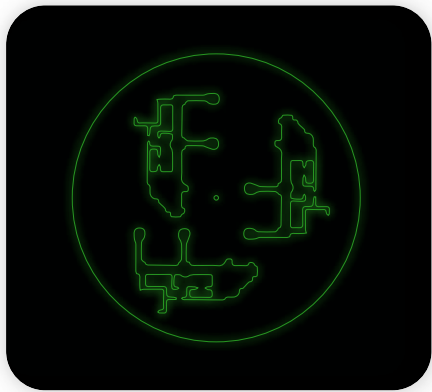
ANCIENT HYPER PRESENT

Sophie Loloi
RISD Graphic Design
MFA 2020

For my mom and dad,
and those who make work from the heart.

Ancient Hyper Present is a gathering in space, where elements of the past and future come together. A slippage of discrete time periods into one another. History and deep futures coalesce to address our current circumstances. When you are folded into what I call the zone, the laws of reality will longer apply. Memories, mythologies and mysticism will surface. Edges *shimmery* and *reflective*, flourish along chrome-crystal structures, bright with promises of the future; they signify a future that may have passed or is yet to come. The ancient past and deep future coalesce in virtual space.
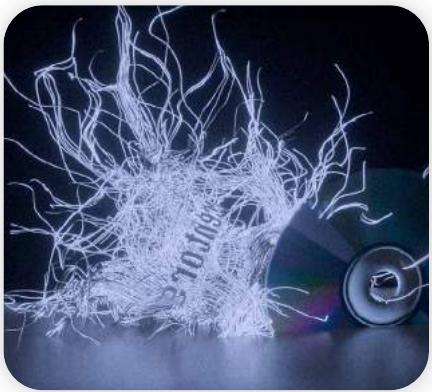
"Poetry is an awareness of the world, a particular way of relating to reality."

—Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting In Time*

THE MATERIALITY OF MELANCHOLY

An essay about lost futures, Blade Runner, the music of Googoosh and other things

By Sophie Loloi

My life has been defined by melancholy. I don't live in the present; I live in the past and future, and mediate between the two. Memories of an alien past and images of a lost future, which has never been mine, haunt me. I found that this feeling is not in my DNA, but in my lived history, and the haunting of a collective memory passed down to me. Melancholy is often described as "a feeling of pensive sadness, typically with no obvious cause,"[1] and this describes well the existential and cultural condition of melancholy that I have come to know. So much so, that I wonder if it is ingrained in my DNA, or if it is a ghost that haunts me from another life. I carry within me memories of the past yet I'm also pulled by images of a future now lost.

1

"Melancholy." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/melancholy. Accessed 10 Apr. 2020.

BEGINNINGS

As the daughter of first generation Iranian immigrants, I grew up hearing about 1970's Tehran as a "better time"— a lost future that would never happen. In the Iranian diaspora, there is a nostalgic fixation on the past. In every family gathering over tea, conversations eventually circle to what could have been but never arrived: a sense of mourning for a past Iran. This becomes especially apparent in not only how my family speaks of the past, but also how the West views Iran as a "then and now." The "before the 1979 revolution,"[2] and what Iran is today. Countless memes circulate online comparing these two temporalities. Often my father says, "the past was our future."

    I first discovered the song *Gole Yakh* by Koroush Yaghmaei[3] when Kanye West sampled the song on Nas— *Adam and Eve* featuring the Dream. Yaghmaei belonged to the pre-revolutionary "golden era" of Iranian music defined by Googoosh, Heydeh, and Mahasti. Strangely, my segue into Iran's pre-revolutionary past, into my parents' childhood, was through a Western remixing. There's a certain beauty which happens through the sampling of music. It mixes, lifts, and reframes the original song, until echoes of it can be heard, but it is now altered into something new. Gole Yakh means "Winter flower" in Persian—a flower which only blooms in the winter. There is an inherent sense of longing in both the lyrics and the melodic texture of the

Video Still of my mother and I at Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Iran. This video was taken by my father in 1997

Image of my cousin which I took in the same spot as the above location in 2013

2

The 1979 Iranian Revolution resulted in the toppling of the Pahlavi dynasty and led to the establishment of the current Islamic Republic. I often hear stories from family about this event and speculations on why it happened, and what would current day Iran be like if it had not.

3

Kourosh Yaghmaei is an Iranian singer, songwriter, composer and record producer, who started his career in the early 1970s. Regarded as one of the greatest Persian psychedelic rock musicians in the history of Iranian rock music, he is known as "the Godfather of Iranian psychedelic rock," as well as the "king of rock".

4

Involuntary memory, or autobiographical memory, is the encountering of images, or 'flashbacks' that occur in our minds without any conscious effort.

Video Still from Googoosh' *Makhloogh* music video, 1972

song. In the chorus, Yaghmaei sings, "Gole yakh to yeh delam shokoofeh kardeh," which in English translates to, "The winter flower has bloomed inside me." It's hard to capture the potency of the lyrics, they become lost in translation. There is a melancholic melody that remains. The texture of this song calls forth a series of memories and images. I remember summers in Iran when we would go on road trips to the Caspian Sea; there would be no phone service for miles but only the road and the lush green landscape submerged in grey mist passing by. I remember rolling down the windows of the car as we went deeper into the mountains, and I could feel subtle droplets of water landing on my face. The more humid the air got, the closer I knew we were to the sea. The melody of this song conjures a yearning for a childhood now gone, and for a threshold to the past. If I had to visualize what this song looks like as a form, I would imagine a chrome crystal-like winter flower, glistening under blue light. A flower so fragile that it might shatter into a million pieces if I touched it. I question the melancholy I feel for music that comes from a time that I was never part of. It almost becomes a form of involuntary memory.[4] *In Search of Lost Time* (1931), Marcel Proust speaks of this phenomenon through the "episode of the madeleine" where the narrator eats a madeleine dipped in tea, and it

reminds him so much of childhood afternoons at his aunt's home in Combray that his mind summons a freight train of images and stories from decades earlier in his life, sparking more than 3,000 pages of recollections. Similarly, when I hear a piece of music with melancholic melodies, I become immersed in a rush of images from earlier times in my life, but also simultaneously feel a yearning for a future that has yet to come.

In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*[5], Toru Watanabe is taken back into a state of memory and nostalgia when he hears a version of The Beatles' song *Norwegian Wood* playing on an airplane. He is swept back into an immersive memory space of his time in Tokyo, which is where the entire narrative takes place, within the space of that memory. Murakami writes: "Memory is a funny thing. When I was in the scene, I hardly paid any mind. I never stopped to think of it as something that would make a lasting impression, certainly never imagined that eighteen years later I would recall it in such detail." When I hear music with melancholic melodies, I am taken back to fragments of memories earlier in my life which I never thought to be significant; now, these images constantly replay in my mind. The melancholic soundscape, or the yearning that is heard in a Googoosh song such as *Pol* or *Do Panjereh*, takes me back again to the Iran I remember from my childhood: family gatherings on the terrace with the cool night breeze passing by, warm tea, fresh fruit, and conversations that only become better as the night continues. I recall the stillness in these moments, the feeling that time had stopped for a moment.
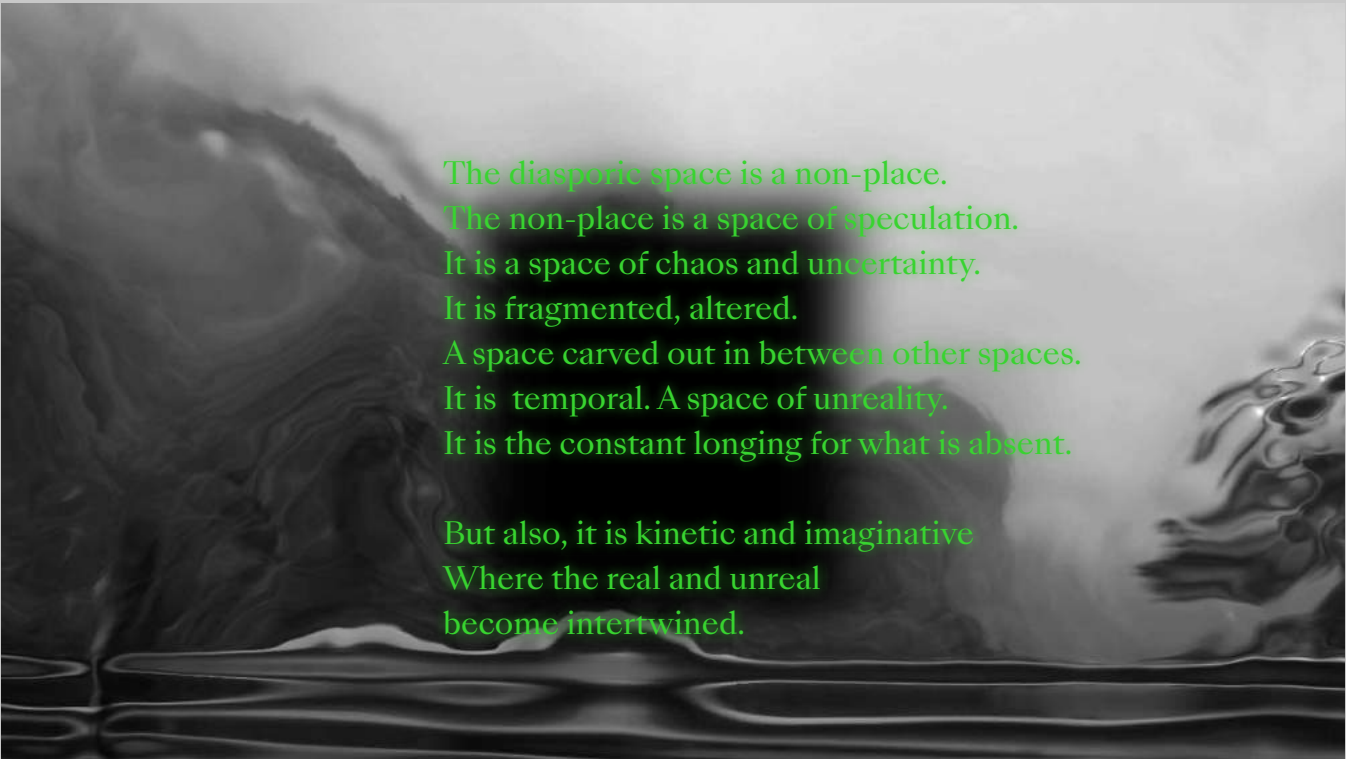

⌃

Photograph which I took on a drive to the Caspian Sea in the North of Iran in 2013. The further you drive into the mountains and closer to the sea, the atmosphere becomes further submerged in mist and clouds. There's something inherently melancholic about the North of Iran for me as it is a space of many memories.

⌃

Video stills from a project inquiring into memory and the diasporic space. The black square in the center represents a space that is carved out in-between other spaces, but also the space of memory which is often incomplete with pieces missing.

⌄

The diasporic space is a non-place.
The non-place is a space of speculation.
It is a space of chaos and uncertainty.
It is fragmented, altered.
A space carved out in between other spaces.
It is temporal. A space of unreality.
It is the constant longing for what is absent.

But also, it is kinetic and imaginative
Where the real and unreal
become intertwined.

Video Still from Mahasti's
Elahi Bemooni music video,
1993

FOREIGN FAMILIARITY

The notion of "post-memory"[6] describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective memories of those who came before. They "remember" these experiences only by means of stories, images, and behaviors with which they grew up. Over time, experiences seem to constitute memories in their own right. The music of my parents' generation feels far more present, far more mine, than the music of my own childhood. The moment that I felt a sense of nostalgia for Yaghmaei's song, a new memory was constructed for me, and I learned about my identity through the referencing of it in a Western song. This understanding of myself becomes a reappropriated copy of a copy, overlayed with a texture of something new, similar to the pixelation that happens each time a video is uploaded to Youtube.

Recalling a weekend in New York brings me to consider the poetic force of melancholy in places of foreign familiarity.[7] During a weekend in New York, while walking in the Lower East Side, I noticed Arabic typography on the side of a building. I hadn't expected to see Arabic typography superimposed on the New York urban landscape. It turned out to be the entrance to the "Cairo street food-inspired" restaurant *Zooba*. The interior, with its neon signs bathing the ceiling, whispered foreign familiarity.[7] Iran, especially Tehran, is a city bathed in the fluorescence of neon signage, most likely a trend that emerged in the 70's, and then time froze. Sitting inside *Zooba* was not home but felt like a simulation of it. The fluorescent neon lights, music with Eastern melodies playing in the background, and the loud conversations between friends and families filled the atmosphere. Sitting next to my friend inside the restaurant the song *Gole Yakh* by Koroush Yaghmaei started playing. Instinctively I started singing along, and two seats down from us there was another person, also in his 20's, who mouthed along with the lyrics. He shouted to his friend to say, "This is a Persian song." So there we were, two 20-somethings singing lyrics to a song our parents may have listened to in their youth, inside a "Cairo-inspired" restaurant, in the lower east side of Manhattan.

Interior of Zooba in New York. The ceilings are embellished with neon lights and patterns similar to Middle Eastern visual motifs.
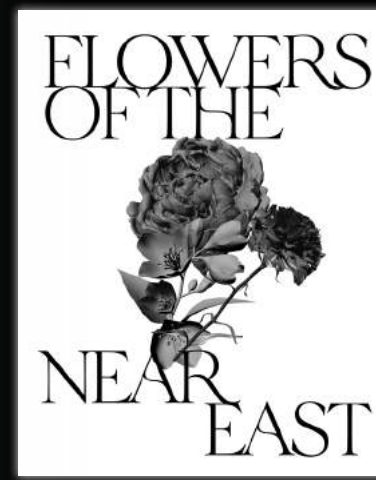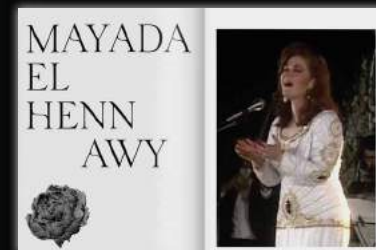

Poster and publication for Flowers of the Near East, 2019

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

I have always been fascinated by ghosts as specters of longing, as yearning for another time. Not ghosts as you see them in a Western horror film, but ghosts as a feeling and haunting of past lives. The spectral feeling which is evoked when you catch a scent of something that takes you back to a memory, and transports you into another space.

Earlier in my graduate thesis, I stated that I was conducting a practice of materializing nostalgic memory, without knowing what that meant yet. My project, *Flowers of the Near East*, explored the hauntological and the nostalgic. Upon reading *Women Who Run With The Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, the first sentence in this book: "Women and Wildlife are both endangered species"— replayed in my head for some time. This led me to think about exile and the female body in exile. This point in my research brought me to ask a question to my female friends from the Middle Eastern diaspora: "What flower invokes a sense of nostalgia for you?" All the answers were received through social media and conversation, because my questions about memory and nostalgia could not be found through a Google search. This type of research and work is heavily embedded in nostalgic connections and the memory of the women from these regions. Such inquiries cannot be found on the internet, it materializes into form through memories and those who feel a sense of nostalgia for it.

6

"Postmemory" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. This term was coined by Marianne Hirsch.

7

Foreign familiarity describes the feeling of nostalgia that is evoked for a place, even though you are not in that place.

ANCIENT PAST DEEP FUTURE

This fixation with the past can project even deeper, into an ancient time. Growing up, I was told the stories of Ancient Persia, the philosophies and rituals of this past, and the importance to remember and preserve the memory of this time.

Walking in modern day Tehran is an interesting juxtaposition of times and eras. On one street, you may see a garden, or a structure which is thousands of years old right next to a 1970s Brutalist building that looks like a structure from the future. I remember when we visited the site of Persepolis[8] in Shiraz. It's a strange thing, to walk the grounds of a site built in 550 B.C., and to see the ruins of an empire now in fragmented shards, left for visitors of the present and future. History tells that this time period was not perfect either; so, why do we return to the past as remembrance of a better time?

From this ancient time, also emerged the poetry of Persia, whose echos cycle through every generation. I cannot read Persian poetry; it is too difficult in the way that reading old English is for a native speaker; yet I keep returning to the words of Rumi or Hafez,[9] the most revered Sufi mystic poets of Persia. My parents will often say, "This is our history, this is our heirloom which must be preserved." I continually return to the English translations of ancient Persia for closure and understanding of my past. I notice this tendency with artists of my generation who are also of the Iranian diaspora. This is usually not explicit in their work, but fragments of this ancient time permeate throughout.

Persepolis ruins site in Shiraz, Iran
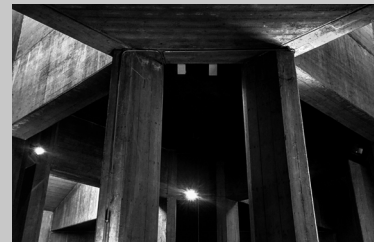
Interior of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran. The museum was first initiated in 1977 by empress Farah Pahlavi. After the 1979 revolution, artworks by artists such as David Hockney and Andy Warhol were stored away and may never be shown due to the conservative nature of the current government. This building was designed by the architect, Kamran Diba. Many pre-revolution buildings were built in the style of Neo-brutalism, showcasing the shift to looking towards the future and modernization in that time.

8

Persepolis was the capital of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550-330 BC). It is located in Shiraz in Fars Province, Iran. The earliest remains of Persepolis date back to 515 BC. It exemplifies the Achaemenid style of architecture. UNESCO declared the ruins of Persepolis a World Heritage Site in 1979.

9

Hafez was known as a pinnacle of Persian Literature and his collected works are often found in the homes of people in the Persian-speaking world, who learn his poems by heart and still use them as proverbs and sayings.

Abandoned Frank Lloyd Wright building in Karaj, Iran
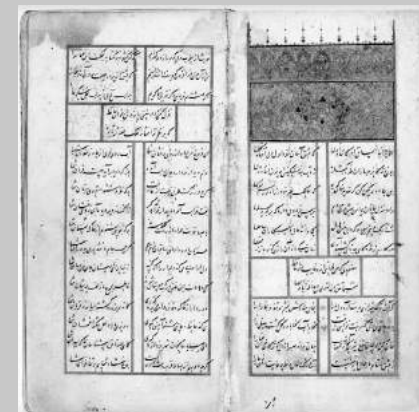
Spread from a 15th century manuscript of the poetry of Hafez

Persepolis ruins site in Shiraz, Iran

HAUNTOLOGY & LOST FUTURES

In his essay *The Ache of Nostalgia*, Fisher catalogues a group of "hauntological" musicians with a particular nostalgia: Burial, Portishead, Massive Attack, Tricky.[11] Fisher characterizes Burial's work as "suffused with an overwhelming melancholy." You can hear it in Burial's love of spooky atmospheres, disquieting sound effects, and the hiss and crackle of vinyl. Fisher points out that it is not so much sound that they share, but rather an existential sensibility. They are "preoccupied with the way technology materializes memory — hence a fascination with television, vinyl records, audiotape, and the sounds of these technologies breaking down." There is an atmospheric quality to this style of music; it is deeply affect-based and intends to incite certain emotions. There is a certain texture to melancholic melodies and sonic soundscapes that synchronously summons visions of a childhood or youth long gone, a yearning for the future that has yet to come, which evokes a cathartic presence in ones own body.

In his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*, Mark Fisher discusses this type of melancholic feeling for a lost future as a phenomenon that is particular to late capitalism. Coined by Jacques Derrida in 1993, the term "hauntology" aimed to capture the ghostly influence that Marxist theory had on the Western world more than 100 years after its author's death, and the "accumulation of ghost-like traces of the past as we move further in the future."[10] Building from Derrida's formulation, Fisher describes hauntological melancholia as "being haunted by what once was, what could have been, and what could still happen." For example, he points to the feeling of listening to electronic musician Burial as being comparable to "walking into abandoned spaces once carnivalized by Raves, and finding them returned to depopulated desolation."

> "being haunted by what once was, what could have been, and what could still happen."

When listening to the music of Burial, I see fleeting moments from my childhood between Iran and Canada, fragments of memories from the different homes we lived in, and my teen years in Houston, going on night drives with friends through the empty highways, blasting music on the highest level with the windows rolled down to let in the night breeze. There is sadness in acknowledging that this time has now passed, but there is also joy felt in the anticipation for the future yet to come.

While reading Fisher's interview with Burial, my Amazon Alexa shuffled through music in the background. Uncannily, she landed on the song *Come Down To Us* by Burial. The track has fragments of voice samples throughout, guiding a narrative, but you're not quite sure who the voices are, and where they come from. It's as if there are fragments and shards of different voices overlayed to create a sense of space and time.

10

Fisher, Mark. Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures. Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014.

11

Burial, Portishead, Massive Attack, Tricky are a few of my favorite musicians which influence my work. Their music is suffused with melancholy, is atmospheric and sonic.

Trentemøller live set in Chicago, 2015

At 13:07min, this track takes you through inconsistencies of emotions, unfolding and guiding you into another state of mind or another zone. You pass from the deeply melancholic to the uplifting euphoric. I think this track is comparable to a David Lynch film. It creates an elusive dreamscape that is both sonic and existential. One Reddit user describes this track as containing both "glimpses of hope in darkness, and glimpses of darkness in hope."[12]

Sound alone, has the sensory qualities to create a sense of space, or sonic imaginaries. One can close their eyes and listen to a song, and instantly be transported to another place in time. I first discovered the music of Trentemøller's "melancholic electronica" when I was in high school in Houston. At the time, I felt disconnected from the space I was in, and through their music found a refuge. Trentemøller describes his methodology as "a mixture of new and vintage gear," using new synthesizers and lo-fi cheap Casio keyboards to create a "mixture of high fidelity sounds with the low."[13] It is through this methodology that the deeply melancholic tones are created. The sound of simultaneous joy and sadness, of past and future, and the collapse which happens when both are combined. The track *Miss You* from the 2006 album Last Resort is a song I would describe with an honest sense of longing to it, and

it was one of the songs that helped me get through difficult moments. In an interview Anders Trentemøller himself says, "That's a beautiful thing music can do, it somehow talks directly to your inner feelings."[14]

I think the same methodology informs the visual world of Trentemøller, and artists alike. This also translates to the design of their album covers, as well as their live concert experiences. In 2015, as an undergrad in Chicago, I finally had the chance to experience Trentemøller live — live, their music was sensorial, completely different than the recorded version. To step into a concert hall is to step into a zone different from the world outside. Entering a black box of a concert hall there is no light from the outside, only the fluorescent lights glowing from the center stage, is to transition between physical and perceived reality. Similar to the experience of placing on a VR headset and being guided by the light and sound inside a black box.

Aura, Nick Verstand, 2017
—
This installation was equipped with multiple biosensors that register heart-rate variability and galvanic skin response. The visitors' emotional "data" is then analysed and metamorphosed into different forms, colours and intensities of light that were beamed down onto them from above, immersing the visitors in an emotive experiential space.

"The sound of simultaneous joy and sadness, past and future, and the collapse which happens when both are combined."

12

Reddit, https://www.reddit.com/r/burial/comments/didgp9/come_down_to_us_is_a_track_ive_been_obsessed_with/

13

Kneschke, Tristan. "Trentemøller Chats Exhaustive Tours, Unfulfilled Gearlust." SR-MAG.COM, February 25, 2019. https://sr-mag.com/2019/02/trentemoller-interview/.

14

NBHAP. "Miss You: Trentemøller tells the story behind his beloved song," January 9, 2017. https://nbhap.com/stories/behind-the-song-trentemoller-miss-you.

BLADE RUNNER AND MEMORY

Blade Runner (1982) is an example of a film embedded in melancholy and hauntology for me: from the grain of the film which overlays the futuristic Los Angeles skyline, to the haunting sonic score by Vangelis which reflects the sadness and identity struggle of the replicants. One of the main themes of this film which I have always been drawn to is the struggles between memory and personhood. Similarly, in the immigrant or diasporic experience, there is always a questioning of personal identity and its connection to memory.

Film Still from *Blade Runner*, 1982
—
This is the opening shot from the film, the eye opens and the camera fades into the futuristic noir landscape. Eyes can be seen as the window to the soul, which reflects many of the core themes in this film.

15

Dalton, Stephen. "Blade Runner: Anatomy of a Classic." British Film Institute. Accessed March 31, 2020. https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/blade-runner.

The plot of the film centers around Deckard (played by Harrison Ford), a bounty hunter who, in this world, holds the title of a 'Blade Runner' assigned with the only job of executing 'Nexus-6 replicants,' or bioengineered androids who were created as slaves for Earth's off-world colonies. Like most science-fiction, *Blade Runner* is set in the future, but it very much reflects our current condition and addresses questions that we grapple with as humans. It asks philosophical questions such as, "how reliable are our memories?" and, "how can we trust which memory is real and which is a simulation?"

In the diasporic experience, one is haunted by memories of a past that one never spent a lot of time in, but still feel a profound connection to, and feel the need to relive that memory to keep it alive. In the film, some of the replicants—including Rachael, have been endowed with false memories and are haunted by the existential question of whether or not their memories are theirs, or implanted. *Blade Runner* is a film "saturated in melancholy, overshadowed by death and peopled by ghosts. Visually and sonically, it is awash with hauntological whispers."[15] In the case of *Blade Runner*, I think there are two main elements which create the melancholic tone—the haunted sense of dreamlike space, as well as the score by Vangelis which echoes the past and the future.

The film's score is "strident analogue electronica, but also lonely jazz saxophones and bluesy echoes from the past." In an interview with the composer himself, Vangelis mentions that he never actually pre-made the score. Rather he watched the edits of the film and composed music on the spot based on 'how they made him feel.'[16] This notion is interesting to me, to create a composition based solely on how something 'makes you feel.' and conducting a methodology of creating work based on intuition as well as reflection. I think that perhaps this is how certain films, music, or artworks become melancholic, when the creator makes by reacting to how certain things make them feel, or an affect-based methodology. I consider my own method of making to similarly be a reflective one, which reacts to the research, memories and dialogues that I am working with.

Video still of me in Iran from my father's archives. This scene is from a visit we took to Isfahan when I was four years old. I remember this scene clearly everytime that I recall it, but my mother always told me that I was much too young to truly remember. So is it possible that what I remember, or think to remember was a simulated or constructed memory based on this video footage that I saw?

"In *Blade Runner* the replicants struggle with the issue of personal identity and its connection to memory."

I would argue that the most important philosophical question that is raised in this film — and most cerebral science-fiction — asks: do our memories, or our past, define who we are? In *Blade Runner* the replicants struggle with the issue of personal identity and its connection to memory. I first saw Blade Runner, when my father introduced me to it as a child — was the first film he saw in the cinemas when he moved to the United States, so it was a film of great connection for him as well. I connected to the character Rachael (played by Sean Young), a replicant who in the beginning of the film believed that the memories of her childhood really did happen: but in reality, they were implanted. Rachael's memories were the experiences of another person that had been passed down to her. Her identity struggle is reflective of moments when we all question the validity of our memories and our past.

As a daughter of immigrants, a woman who has grown up between Iran and the West, when I am asked, where do you come from? And how did you get here? I scan through the many possible versions of how I could answer.

Film Still from *Blade Runner*, 1982

Film Still from *Blade Runner* 2049, 2017
—
Neon lights have always been part of the visual landscape of the Blade Runner universe. The futuristic city skyline being flooded in smog and neon suggests a sense of nostalgia.

16

Purdom, Clayton. "Here's How Vangelis Made Blade Runner's Haunting Score." News. Accessed March 31, 2020. https://news.avclub.com/here-s-how-vangelis-made-blade-runner-s-haunting-score-1798262124.

With the question of "what does memory look like as a form?" and "what is the materiality of memory?" I used an EEG headwear device to track and collect data of what my own memories could look like. I connected this device to a brainwave visualization
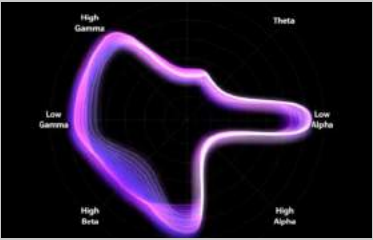

Film Still from *Blade Runner*, 1982
—
In this pivotal moment in the film, Rachael stares longingly at old photographs, coming to terms with her own identity and memories.

Film Still from *Blade Runner*, 1982

17

Video memory is a term that I use to describe memory that might be constructed based on video footage which I have seen previously.

18

Reconstructive memory is a theory of memory recall, in which the act of remembering is influenced by various other cognitive processes including perception and imagination.

19

In the universe of *Blade Runner*, the Voight-Kampf test was used to assist in the testing of an individual to see whether they were a replicant or not. It measures bodily functions such as respiration, heart rate, blushing and eye movement in response to emotionally provocative questions.

There is not one answer to my identity, but many different versions of how I have reconstructed this story in my head. I come from many places, each of them a home, but also places that I barely knew. I was born in Rollas, Missouri where my father was studying for his PhD in Geomechanics, spending his nights studying rocks and the earth. Nine months after my father finished his studies, we moved to Tehran, Iran. I don't remember my birthplace, the land that I was born on, but my first conscious memory takes places in Iran. I was maybe two years old, and it was my aunt's wedding (I think) and my uncle was holding my hands helping me to stand up and take my first wobbly steps, helping me to pretend to dance. Maybe it's not possible that this is real, but rather it is a constructed image I pieced together based on old video footage (video memory?[17]) that I saw, or from stories I was told about this night. But it feels so real. Or, is it just reconstructive memory?[18]

This moment of questioning becomes comparable with the scene in *Blade Runner* when Rachael leaves a photograph with Deckard after she first confronts him about the positive result on her Voigt-Kampff test.[19] To prove that she cannot be a Replicant, she gives him a photograph of her and her mother sitting on a porch, smiling at the camera. Deckard responds with, "Those aren't your memories, they're somebody else's." It is left up to the audience to decide if the photograph is real or not. If our identities are determined by our remembered experiences, and these experiences can be faked, how can we know that our emotions are not mere simulations, as faulty and incomplete as an android's? The scene with Rachael's photograph, along with all of the other photographs in the film, symbolizes the complexity of memory in a world dominated by the circulation of reproduced images.

In the diasporic experience, one is haunted by memories of a past that is not one's past, but still feel a profound connection to, and feel the desire to relive that memory, and keep it alive. This is ultimately where my fascination with memory has emerged from, from the questioning of my past, and the levels of connection that I have to it. As I continued my explorations in such themes, I began to ask, what does memory look like as a form? And how can it materialize?

THE
SHIMMER

Film Still from *Annihilation*, 2017

The melancholic space is somatic; it calls to the interiority of the self. When folded into this interior landscape, or what I call the zone, memories and fragments of the past surface. Within the zone, laws of reality are not the same as the space outside of it. There is a sense of mysticism in this type of space. The senses, sight, sound and smell are heightened. The zone is a passage you enter to pass into another state of mind. It might be similar to the experience of the inside of a concert hall, where you enter from the world outside, into a black box where light and sound are heightened. It is a landscape that "is a spectacle, perceived and interpreted by the human eye...a space with a frame around it, planted like a garden full of meaning."[20] The zone is both *shimmery* and *porous*, *iridescent* and *reflective*, a threshold between here and there.

20

Republic, The Staff of The New. "Tarkovsky's 'Stalker' Is a Climate Change Horror Film." UExpress. Accessed April 11, 2020. http://www.uexpress.com/new-republic/2017/6/4.

21

Purdom, Clayton. "Chernobyl, Annihilation, and the Sci-Fi Idea That Swallows Everything." The A.V. Club. Accessed March 31, 2020. https://www.avclub.com/a-brief-history-of-the-zone-the-sci-fi-idea-that-swall-1838901974.

This idea is explored in a series of science fiction films, literature, and art, one of my favorites being in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) introduced me to the zone, as a concept from which other films have taken inspiration. The story is set in a distant future and the main protagonist works in an unnamed location as a "Stalker" who leads people through the "Zone," an area in which the normal laws of reality do not apply and remnants of seemingly extraterrestrial activity lie undisturbed among ruins. The Zone contains a place called the "Room," said to grant the wishes of anyone who steps inside. *Stalker* contains a specific type of landscape—an internal one wherein "the basic laws of reality seem to be warped."[21] Strategically, Tarkovsky shows our world, the world outside the zone, in monochrome. Once the three main characters enter the boundaries of the zone, the film changes to color. Tarkovsky invests in the zone as a mirage, a landscape that might be perceived in different ways by each individual who enters it. Its fragmentary and multitudinous character points to the zone as a specular space.

Film Still from *Stalker*, 1979

Film Still from *Annihilation*, 2017
—
The shimmer is the threshold to crossover into the zone type space in this film known as "Area-X."

The zone is both shimmery and porous, a threshold between here and there. "It is overgrown the same way that the Demilitarized Zone is overgrown, that strip of land between North and South Korea that is like a geographic scar. It is abandoned the way that the area around Chernobyl is abandoned. The science fiction author Bruce Sterling calls spaces like these "involuntary parks."[22]

This notion of the Zone is also explored in Metahaven's visual essay, *Possessed* where documentary and fiction blend together in a collage. "An abandoned airport in Croatia—a space of hypermobility rendered immobile—populated by sleep-walking urban tribes and overgrown shrubs (wild nature reclaiming the abandoned involuntary parks) appears as something akin to the "zone." "Possessed is a darkly arresting diagnosis of a hybrid digital space between the inside and the outside." This film deviates between a documentary and dreamscape which collapses the past, present, and future. The haunting of the fall of the Soviet Union intermixes with the present contemporary conditions and uncertain future which we face. In one critical scene,

> "The zone is both shimmery and porous, a threshold between here and there."

the millenial protagonist finds an abandoned building full of books on the ground which are post-communist remains from a forgotten past. She asks "what does it mean to be born too late?"

In Alex Garland's 2017 adaptation of *Annihilation*, a group of four women set out on a journey into "The Shimmer" in search of a lighthouse for reasons they never quite articulate. The film centers around Lena, a biologist who is accompanied by a psychologist, a paramedic and a geologist on a mission to cross "The Shimmer." *Annihilation* gestures to *Stalker's* zone, establishing a permeable border—a translucent, rainbow-hued bubble— between our world and another one.

22
Involuntary Parks is a term coined by Bruce Sterling, as part of his environmental/art movement Viridian Green, to describe areas of the planet returned to the wild through technological or environmental breakdowns or military action, e.g., Chernobyl.

Upon entering "The Shimmer," it becomes clear that time does not function as it does in there as it does in our world; the group loses days without being able to account for when they got to their present location. The zone turns these characters inwards; they grapple with loss and grief in their search for meaning.

Searching for inward truth and meaning are foundational principles of Persian Sufi Mysticism[23]. In *Conference of the Birds*[24], the birds of the world all gather together to find the legendary Simorgh (which in Persian means "phoenix") who is said to be able to correct all the wrongs of humans by leading the birds. In this Sufi poem, each of the birds represent a human fault ...as in many Sufi literature or thought, this is an allegory for attaining enlightenment, or finding an inward truth. Throughout the poem, the Hoopoe takes charge of the journey to find the Simorgh, telling the birds that they must pass over The Seven Valleys to reach their truth. Only thirty birds arrive at the abode of Simorgh, where they later learn that they themselves are the Simorgh, which in Persian means "thirty birds." Like reaching the zone or reaching the lighthouse, the path through the Seven Valleys offers an undiscovered truth and there is a sense of passage.

This is a ritual space, in which you leave the familiar, enter the betwixt/between, a liminal zone. And then, you enter the zone. Entering the zone is where one is led through a right of passage, where there is a consciousness separation for a time that is familiar. In this threshold space, there is a change of perception that occurs. To enter this space is to enter a different zone of perception.

Illustration of *Conference Of The Birds* from a Persian manuscript of the poem by Farid ud-Din Attar

23

Sufism is a mystical form of Islam, a school of practice that emphasizes the inward search for God and shuns materialism. Practitioners of Sufism have been referred to as "Sufis."

24

Conference of the Birds is a Persian poem by Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar, commonly known as Attar of Nishapur. In the poem, the birds of the world gather to decide who is to be their sovereign, as they have none. The hoopoe, the wisest of them all, suggests that they should find the legendary Simorgh. The hoopoe leads the birds, each of whom represents a human fault which prevents human kind from attaining enlightenment.

Film Still from Metahavens' *Possessed*, 2018

Film Still from *Annihilation*, 2017
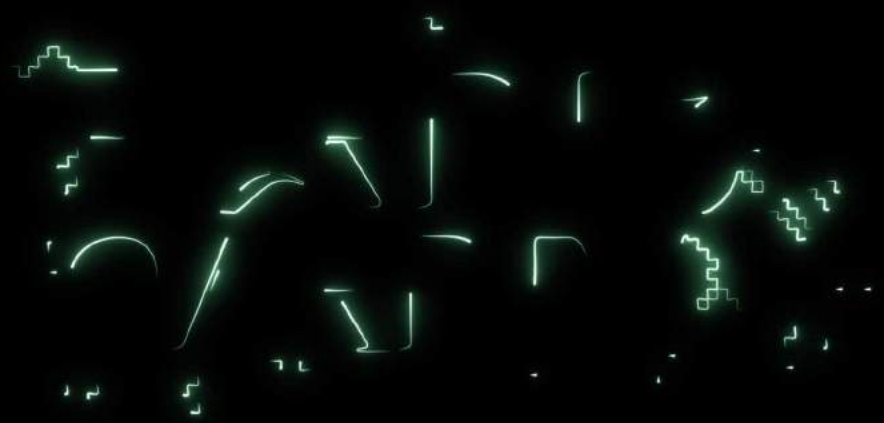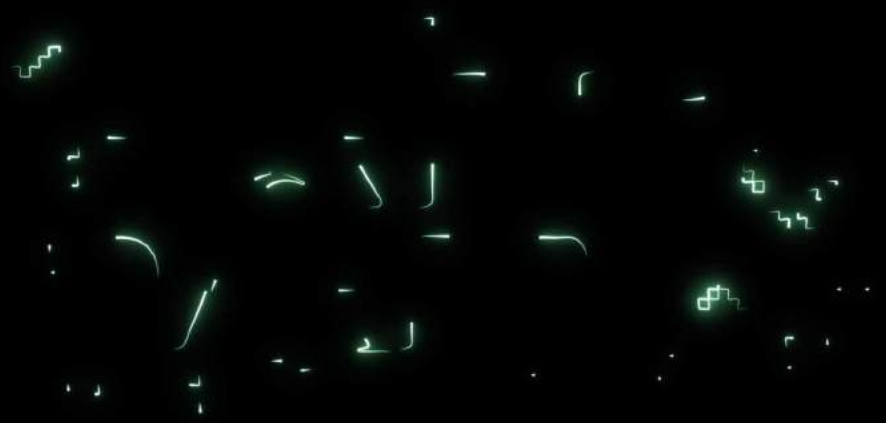
Reconnecting....

Connecting....

Now you have entered the zone

PARDIS GARDEN

Welcome to *Pardis Garden*, a memory palace set in virtual space. Here, in time beyond time, the world slips away, offering a refuge for reflection in an altered mystical reality. Modelled on a template for an ancient Persian garden, Pardis is re-imagined as a post-disaster, eco-oasis. Assembled fragments of speculative climate futures live alongside ancient history, mythology, and personal memories as a digital, multisensorial archive.

To enter this fictional utopia is to travel inward. As a visitor, the journey begins by passing through a Record Shop playing Iranian music of the 1970's — Googoosh, Haydeh, Yaghmaei. This specific genre of music is intermixed with sounds of nature in the background. Four sections lead to the center of the garden, where there is a record player, inscribed with the fragments of a garden blueprint. This centerpiece acts as a fulcrum, around which to navigate through three other rooms: *The Dome of Extinct Birds*, *The Anahita Temple*, and *The Room of Eternal Light*. In each space, the record player is present. Stepping closer to it activates the space, in which glass-like plants flourish in an environment that shimmers with a digital blue halation, with the sounds of a nightingale echoing under a glass dome. Amidst these contradicting elements is a view of nostalgia as richly melancholic, perhaps similar to a Burial song, or a lucid dream

In this virtual space, I honored the ancient blueprints, and laid out a space similar to that of the Persian Gardens, with four sections, all leading to the center. This project emerged from a speculative design prompt: I imagined a post-eco-disaster world, and the need for a space that could house memories. The land outside is now barren, but there is an oasis, a paradise cyborg garden that has been created by the surviving inhabitants, a high-tech botanical garden. Those who enter the garden are invited to interact with the flora and fauna and interact with memories of the past. The botanical garden becomes a digital multisensorial archive.

This Garden is flourished with chrome crystal structures which are a vector; the chrome is sturdy, shiny and bright with promises of the future, a future that may have passed or is yet to come. The crystalline structures seem delicate, like they will shatter if you could actually touch them, and the forms they take on seem steeped in longing and nostalgia. However this is longing and fragility in the context of a virtual world; physically immaterial.

Historically, the Persian garden was a place of refuge — an oasis in the desert. In Persian lore, to enter the garden is to leave the familiar and enter into a celestial realm. Here I have modelled this space as an ancient Persian garden, you are invited to leave notions of the familiar, as paradise that is ancient. The world slips away, if only for a few moments. Ancient blueprints of the garden draw from the Zoroastrian[27] division of the universe into four parts, four seasons, or four elements: "water, wind, soil and fire." In Farsi, the word for garden, pardis, derives from the word paridaeza, which literally means "walled garden;"[28] however, as a compound word, paridaeza came to mean a celestial garden, a heavenly paradise on earth. Within the confines of this walled garden, time stops and the world outside slips away, if only for a few moments.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (2700 BC), the Babylonians described their Divine Paradise:

```
In this immortal garden
stands the Tree
beside a sacred fountain
the Tree is placed
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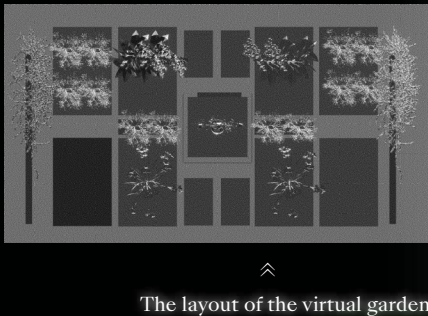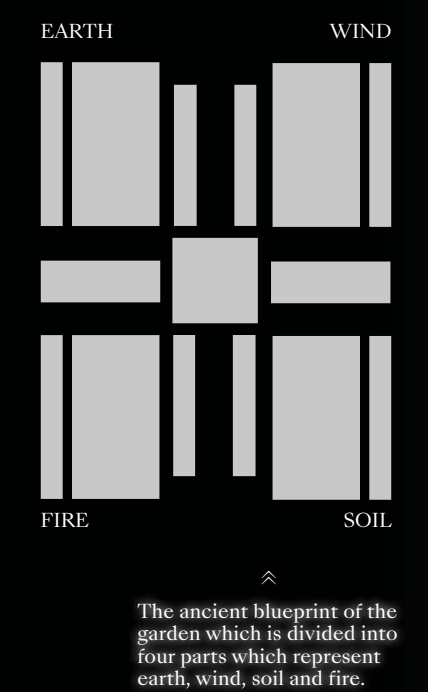
EARTH   WIND

FIRE   SOIL

⌃

The ancient blueprint of the garden which is divided into four parts which represent earth, wind, soil and fire.

⌃

The layout of the virtual garden

⌃

Photo taken at the Eram Persian Garden in Shiraz, Iran

⌃
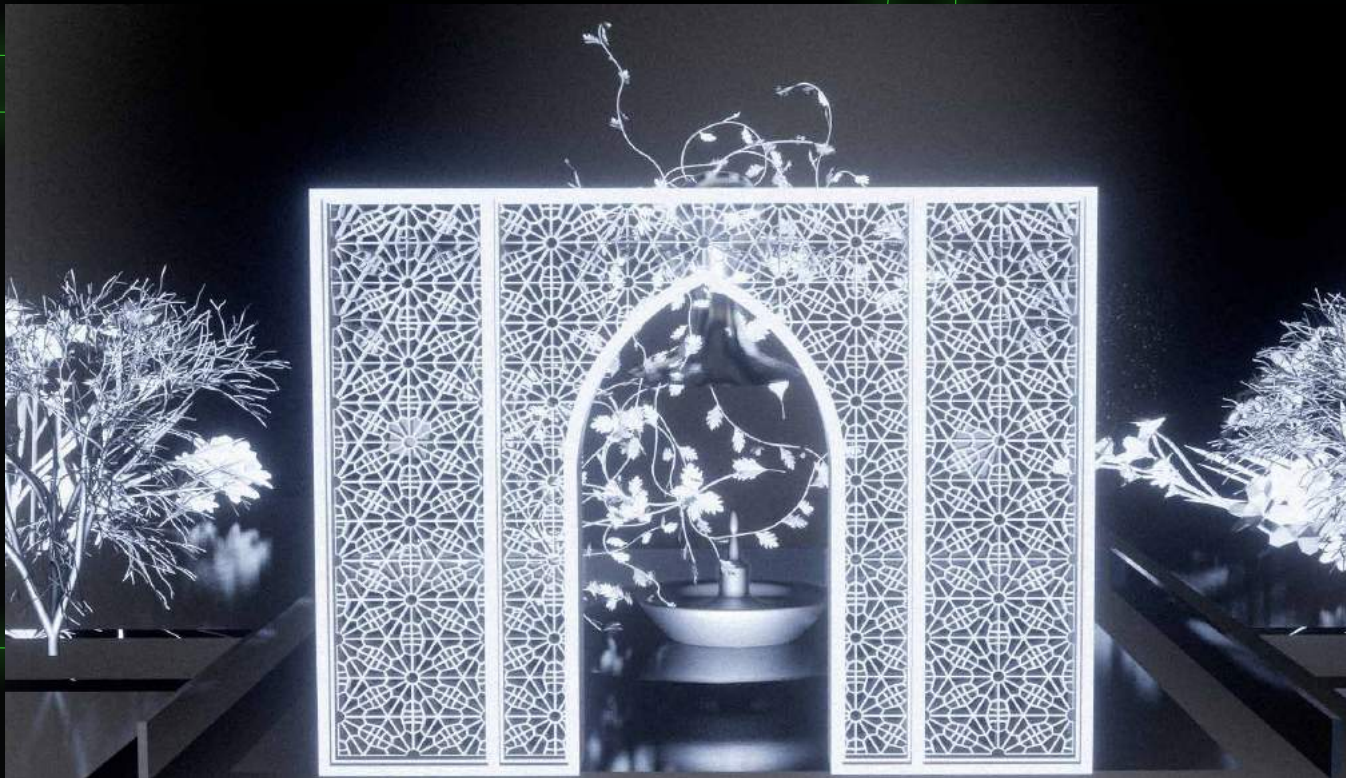
Video still from virtual garden

27

Mahmoudi Farahani, Leila, Bahareh Motamed, and Elmira Jamei. "Persian Gardens: Meanings, Symbolism, and Design." Landscape Online 46 (January 31, 2016): 1-19. https://doi.org/10.3097/LO.201646.

28

Shirvani, Hamid. "The Philosophy of Persian Garden Design: The Sufi Tradition." Landscape Journal 4, no. 1 (1985): 23-30. https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.4.1.23.
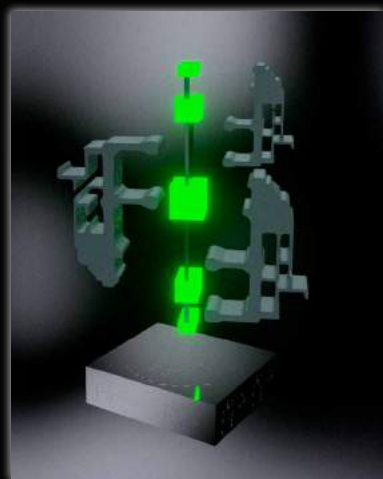
The Dome of Birds, Virtual Space

The Temple, Virtual Space

The record player which lives whithin each space of the virtual garden.

The plan of these gardens always includes the four rivers of Paradise, flowing towards the four quarters of heaven, or from them towards the center. Persian Gardens are an important part of Sufi Mysticism in which "the Sufi path is an inward journey whose goal is to know who we really are, from where we came. Its aim is also to know ultimately the nature of Reality."[29] If the Sufi path is about an inward journey, of finding your inward truth, perhaps this virtual garden is a an invitation for the viewer to travel inwards into another realm.

This is a paradise which I created for visitors to interact with nature, mythology, the ancient past, and their own memories, through my own. Gardens are known to bridge a connection between the two worlds of matter and meaning, and to create the opportunity for further interaction between human and nature. This virtual garden is a zone type space. Just as in Tarkovsky's zone, the laws of reality do not apply in this virtual world; with this in mind, how might this garden stretch time and author a meditative space beyond the outside world? I position my thesis as a reflective garden and the materialization of an inner landscape. Every work that I make from here on, will become a part of this space, ever changing, and ever growing, into something new.

29

Moynihan, Elizabeth B. Paradise as a Garden: In Persia and Mughal India. 1st ed. World Landscape Art & Architecture Series. New York: G. Braziller, 1979.

RECORD
SHOP

GOOGOOSH
POSTER

Conversation:
Noru Khan
& James Goggin

ATLAS

Conversation:
With my Mother

MYTH

THE
GARDEN

VOLCANO
LOVER

FLOWERS
OF THE
NEAR EAST

DREAM
GENERATOR

Conversation:
Jukob Steensen

THE
TEMPLE

DOME
OF BIRDS

Conversation:
Hirad Sab

REMEMORY
ROOM

MYTH

FLOWERS
OF THE
NEAR EAST

THE
TEMPLE

RECORD SHOP

Welcome. This is your first stop before entering the garden space. Here you will hear Iranian music of the 1970's intermixed with sounds of nature in the background. This space was created as your entry way into the garden. Here you will experience the hauntological, the past, present and future at once. The Record Shop is an experiment in sonic imaginaries. The yearning in the voice of Googoosh resonates, you hear the dust of the past, the texture of vinyl seeped with desire. The deep immersion of Trentemøller is dipping your toes into another world, where sonic reverberations echo deeply in your chest. Burial, sounds like the afterglow after a night at a rave, it sounds like bodies resonating with each other at one frequency. Sounds, images, vibrations meld together to create a synchronization of senses.
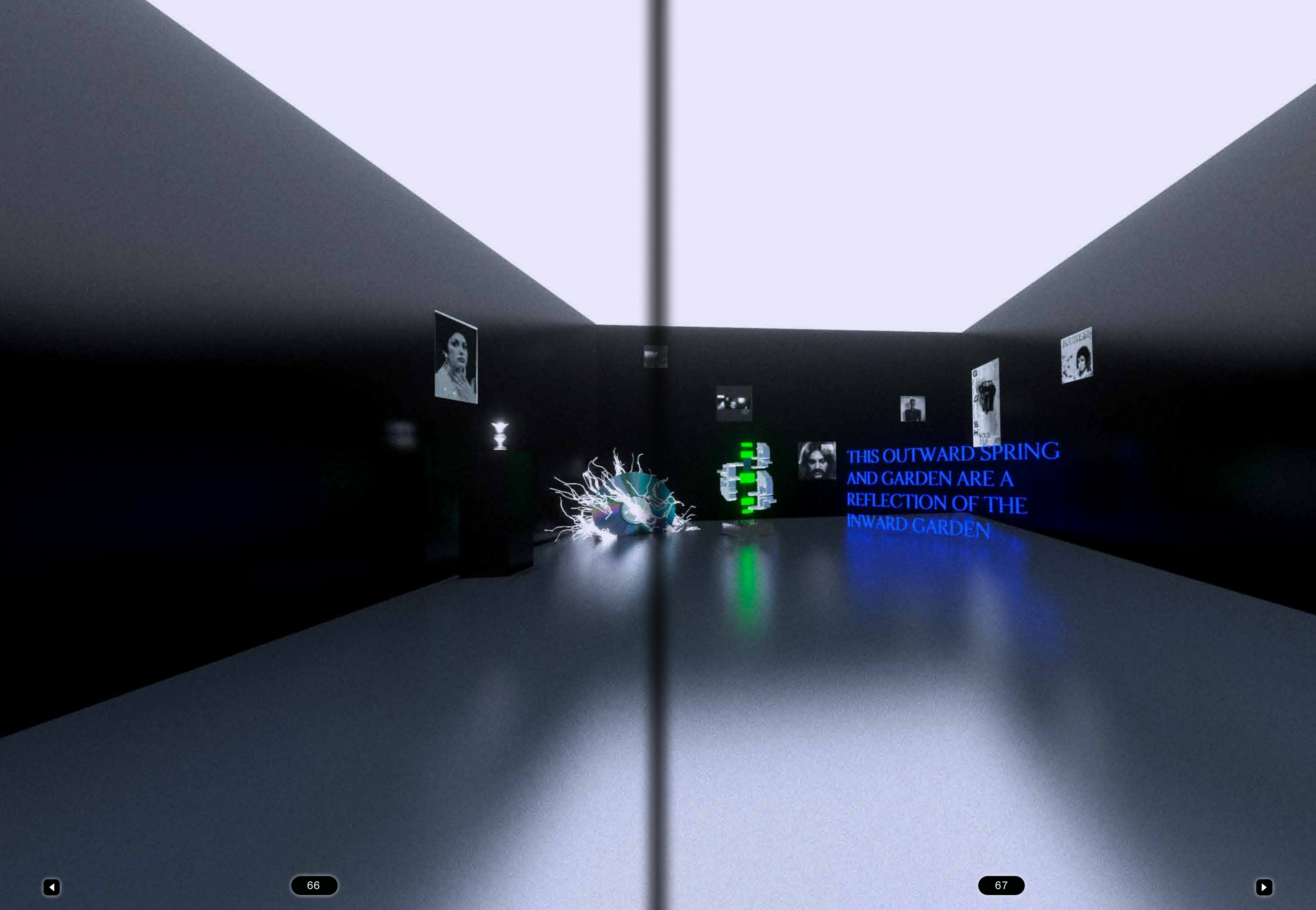
THIS OUTWARD SPRING
AND GARDEN ARE A
REFLECTION OF THE
INWARD GARDEN
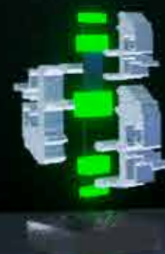
THIS OUTWARD SPRING
AND GARDEN ARE A
REFLECTION OF THE
INWARD GARDEN

THIS OUTWARD SPRING AND GARDEN ARE A REFLECTION OF THE INWARD GARDEN

THIS OUTWARD SPRING AND GARDEN ARE A REFLECTION OF THE INWARD GARDEN
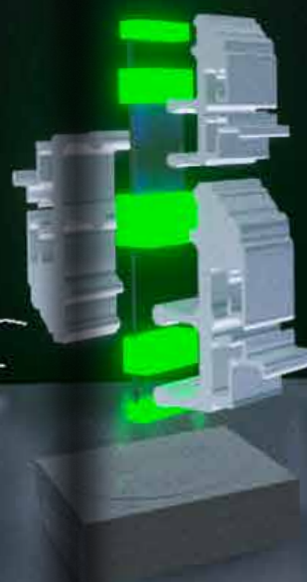
THIS OUTWARD SPRIN
AND GARDEN ARE A
REFLECTION OF THE
INWARD GARDEN

THIS OUTWAR
AND GARDEN A
REFLECTION O
INWARD GARD

GOOGOOSH POSTER

MOTION POSTER

2019

Googoosh was Iran's most famous pop singer, until she was silenced following the 1979 revolution, when female singers were labeled "temptresses" and forbidden to release records or perform publicly in the presence of men. This poster, unearthed from a young Iranian woman's collection of memories and trinkets, looks at an alternate reality or past where Googoosh would have been able to continue to perform in Iran in 1979 had the revolution not happened. This poster was originally presented as a moving poster that functions as a relic of a speculative past.

H S O O G O O G

WORLD TOUR

1979

TEHRAN
ISFAHAN
TABRIZ
SHIRAZ
AHVAZ
URMIA
BEIRUT
TRIPOLI
BAGHDAD
MOSUL
BASRAH
KABUL
KHUJAND
DUSHANBE
TASHKENT
SHAHRISABZ
BAKU
ASHGABAT
TBILISI
YEREVAN
SHIRAZ
TEHRAN

THIS OUT
AND GAR
REFLECT
INWARD

THIS OUTW

AND GARDE

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THIS OUTWAR
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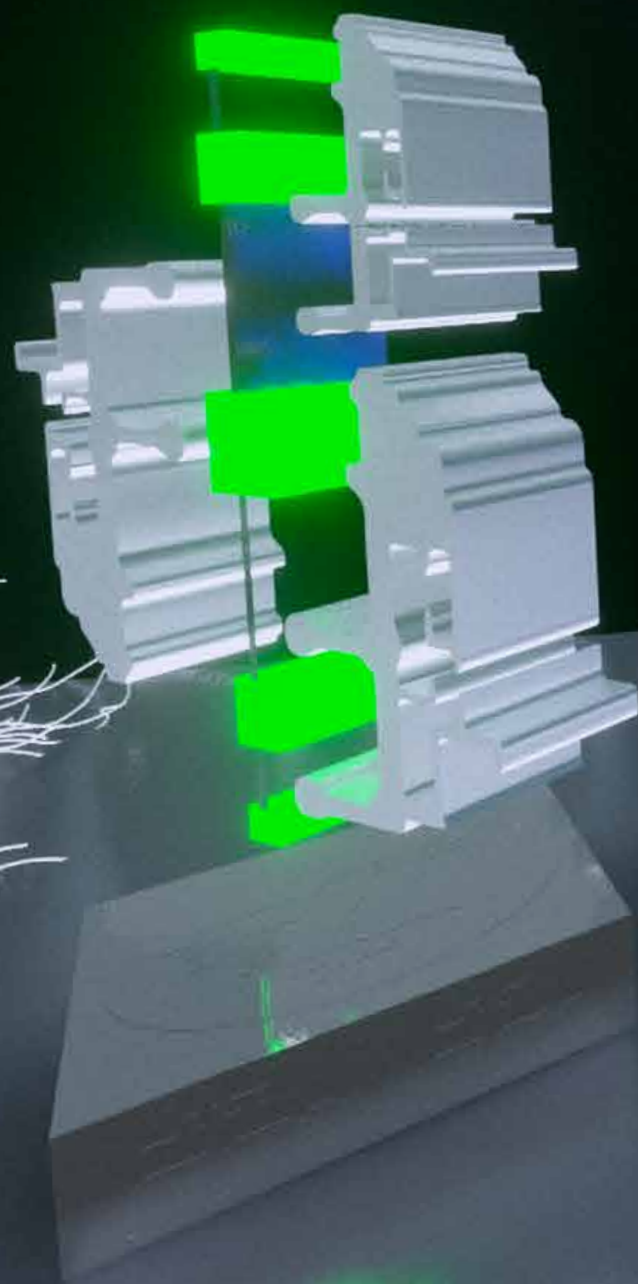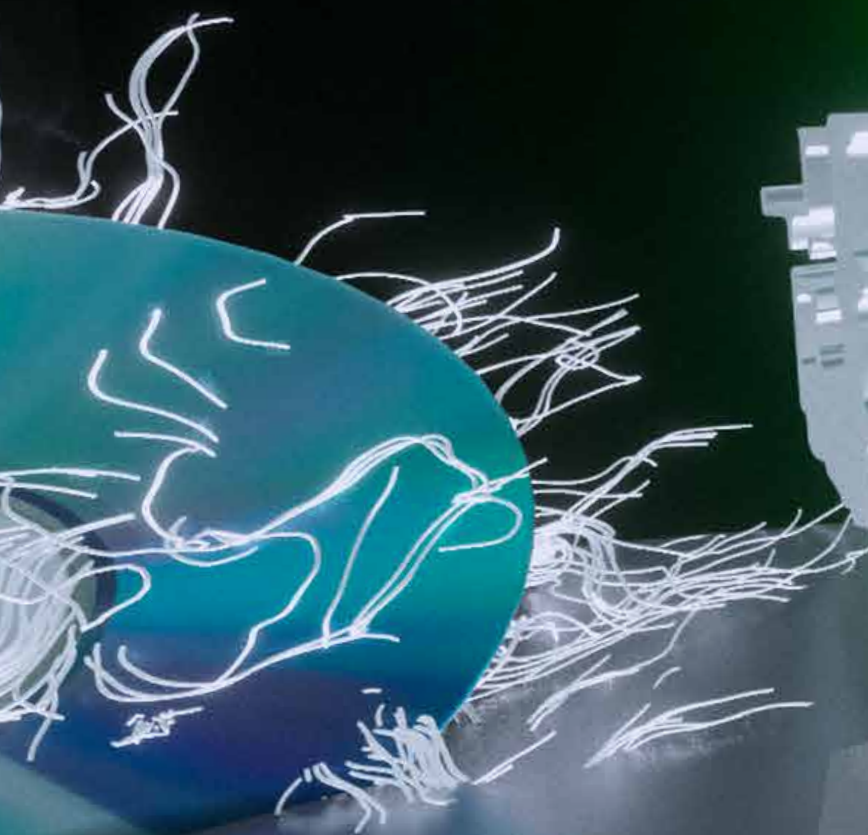
A conversation on hauntology, nostalgia, raves, & title sequences that give you feels.

For this conversation, I asked Nora Khan and James Goggin to join me in a conversation about media which we find to be hauntological. Our dialogue happened over Zoom, where we shared and discussed music, title sequences, Boiler Room sets, etc. that moved us through various affective qualities. I am indebted to this exchange and generative sharing, as it helped me work through various themes that have become central to this thesis. This is a transcription of part of our exchange.

Hello Nora & James! I hope you are both well and staying healthy.

Thank you both so much for agreeing to do a dialogue with me for my thesis book. You have both been so influential in giving me so much of the reading/source material which has led me to this stage in my thesis and informing my research as I move forward.

For the interview/conversation I had this idea that we all bring in 2-3 types of media content and have a discussion about it.

In relation to some of the specific topics I am talking about in my thesis: hauntology, memory, melancholy, the music of Burial and artists alike, the emotive qualities of electronic music, the sonic and spectral, science fiction references such as Blade Runner and Stalker, I wanted to propose that we all bring pieces of media (music, film, title sequence, poster, music vi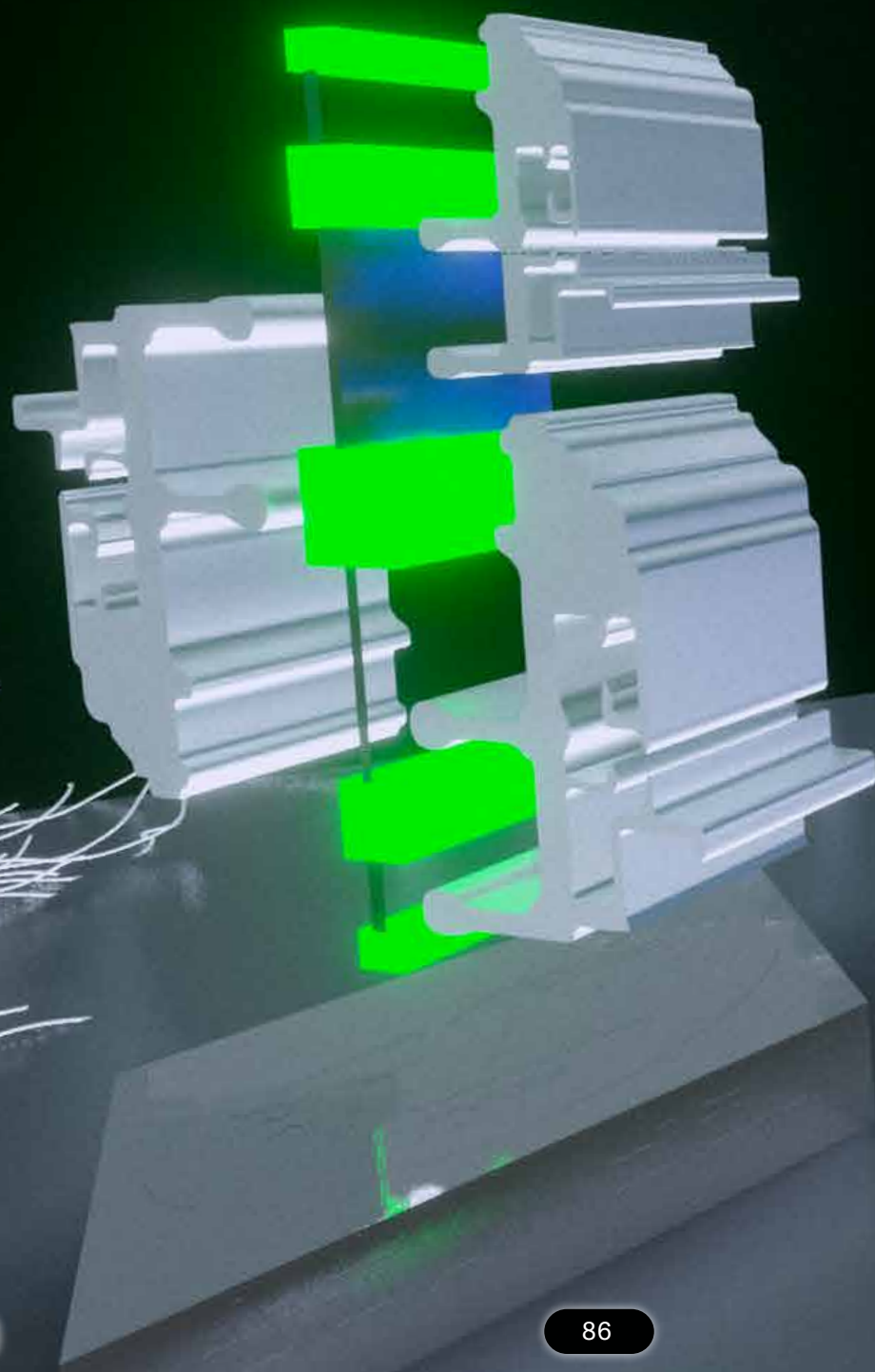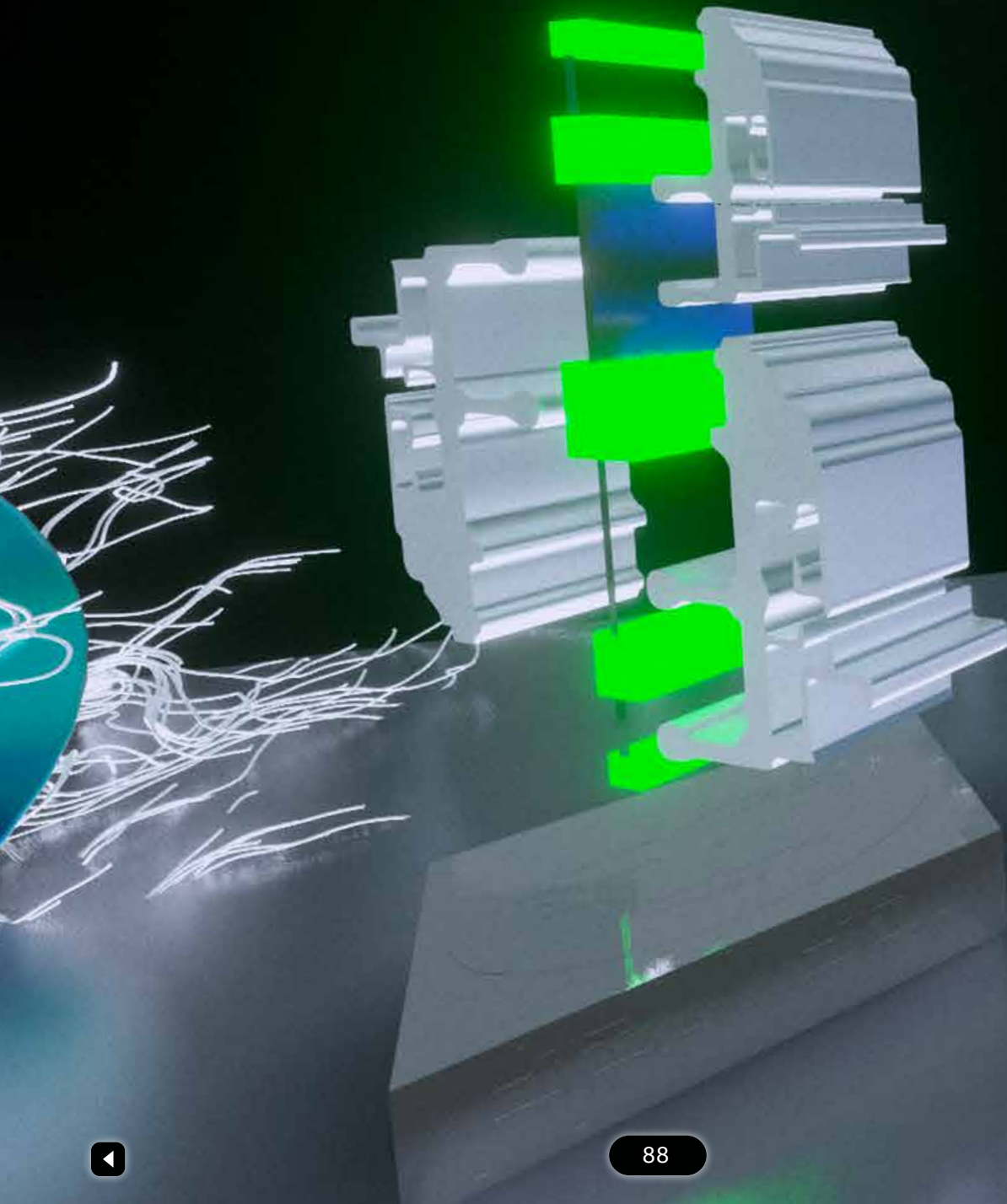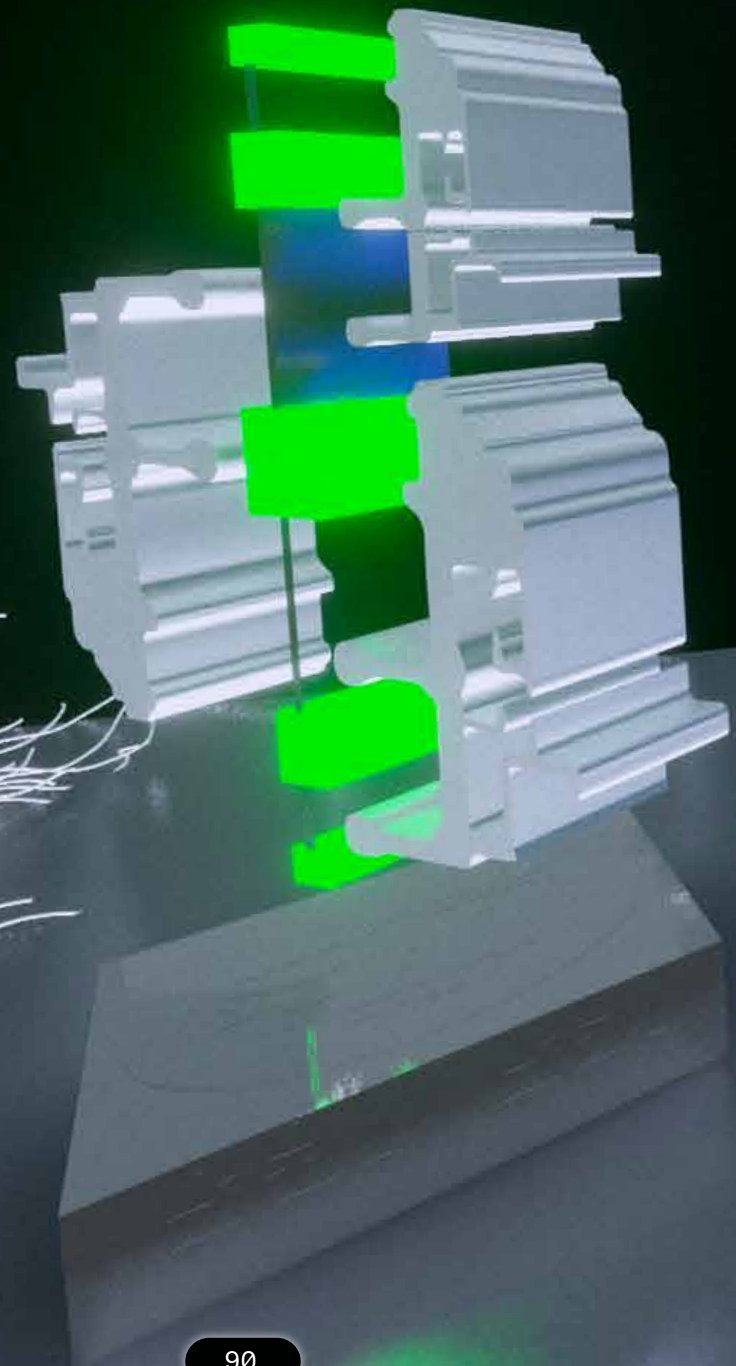deo, any piece of design) reference that might be related to the themes listed here. And we can take some time before the conversation to experience the media and then talk about it

If this sounds good, I was thinking perhaps we could plan a conversation sometime next week that you are both available? Thank you and looking forward!

Warmly,
Sophie

(Also—I curated this playlist below with a selection of music that I thought to be hauntological. If you get a chance to listen, would love to have a conversation about some of the songs on here)

https://open.spotify.com/
playlist/5j6erWP3sR6ob75MpH4J5x?si=D9mFc53uSzuR90qj9Y8Osw

Hey Nora, Sophie,

This weekend would work for me. I'm excited (and very humbled and slightly intimidated!) about the opportunity to join a conversation with both of you. Super looking forward. Sophie, I've been catching up on reading your brief for us here this morning.

Hauntological Playlist, yes! Did I ever tell you that Aïsha Devi (previously known as Kate Wax, very previously known as Aïsha Enz) was one of my first students at ÉCAL when I taught a workshop there way back in 1999? She's amazing, and I can't remotely claim that I taught her ANYthing!

I'm in a playlist mood lately, I just made a 1990s indie pop playlist for Audrey, our 15yo, at her request.

I need to get thinking about my hauntological triptych now…

More soon!

James this playlist is AMAZING! Thank you for sending along,
it's perfect work music for the day. Reminds me so much of this
one dance club/bar we have in Houston called Barbarella where
they play strictly 90's indie music...PJ Harvey, Sonic Youth,
Slowdive...it's how I got introduced to all of this music. So
strangely this playlist takes me back to my end of high-school/
early 20's in Houston. I love it!

How is 2pm?

Thank you both! Excited to chat tomorrow!
S

Sounds great!

Thanks for the great playlists, both of you! I love Aïsha Devi.
James, so cool that you taught her! And second on the years of
CD-burning - one day I'm supposed to organize all my burnt CD
music and streamed music on multiple computers into an "archive"
- ha ha.

Sophie I'm not sure I've shared this piece, probably not because
I don't like sharing things I do. But here is an essay I did
woven in with interviews with Evian Christ, David Rudnick, and
Lee Gamble on rave nostalgia and the aesthetic of it all - some
images and links you might enjoy in there, too:
http://postmatter.merimedia.com/articles/new-mythologies/nora-
khan/

Still choosing my media because there's so much, but I wanted to
share three of my favorite pieces of music, if you all want to
throw it on at some point:

Autechre, 444: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-Cxr4nXQIs

Autechre, Further: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvqSzRCLvEQ

Orbital's Dwr Budr:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTrZ4m84uI4

NNK

Hey Nora, Sophie,

2pm is perfect for me.

CD-ripping and burning, so much time spent! (And before that,
actual mix tapes, perfecting pause and record button mastery.)

Nora, so glad you shared your Postmatter article, I hadn't seen
this, it's right up my street. Underground Resistance, rave
nostalgia, retro mania, etc. Can't wait to give it a proper
read. (As an aside, see the Riso-printed flyer I made for Simon
Reynolds's reading of Retromania at MCA Chicago years back).

I've got three pieces of media lined up for today (only finally
decided late last night, one of them really feeling like an
epiphany for me, now that I had to look at things through
Sophie's assignment lens!). I presume we hold them until our
call? Happy to list out this morning otherwise too. But maybe
it's nice for us to take each other through them via choppy Zoom
stream?

Nora, can't believe the three tracks you shared. All major faves
of mine! Two absolute Autechre faves, on their calmer edge of
their spectrum (generally my preferred side of their work, even
though sometimes I need noisy algorithmic beat onslaughts too).
I'm the person who actually has a "Smooth Aphex Twin" playlist,
allowing me to occasionally play AFX tracks on family road trips
without everyone crazy protesting at otherwise grinding bleeps.
(To wit: <https://music.apple.com/us/playlist/smooth-aphex-twin/
pl.u-11PbYu8YoJaR>)

And no way, that 444 YouTube video sets the track to the infamous
C'était un rendez-vous film!

Orbital's Dwr Budr is a MAJOR fave, I love that track so much, I'm
a big Orbital fan. I blasted that In Sides album non-stop when it
came out, during my undergrad studies in London, and still do now
and then. (That's Alison Goldfrapp on backwards vocals, credited
as "Auntie" on the record sleeve!)

Another all-time Orbital fave, from the earlier Snivilisation
album: "Forever" https://youtu.be/DYKb_T18Edo

I also played the "brown album" Orbital 2 non-stop in high
school, e.g. "Halcyon and On and On" https://youtu.be/mNjmGuJY5OE

See you later today!

James

JG

I have three things. I was gradually finding unexpected connections between the three pieces of media that I've collected. Actions like looking, meeting, seeing, aching, haunting, and seeking. So I've got a cover version, a requiem, and a trailer. (Scrolling through images, stops back at the first image) I don't know if either of you recognize what this is already?

SL

Is that Grace Jones?

JG

It's Grace Jones and it's a still from *I've Seen That Face Before (Libertango)*. It's from 1981 and it's a video directed by Jean-Paul Goude. He was a famous French art director who Grace was with as a partner for many years. He's responsible for the iconic and also slightly problematic portrayals of her as a kind of exoticized African woman in many different guises. But this video has always fascinated me, and it kind of struck me: I wonder if we could claim this is kind of proto-hauntological. So maybe I'll just play it and see what you all think.
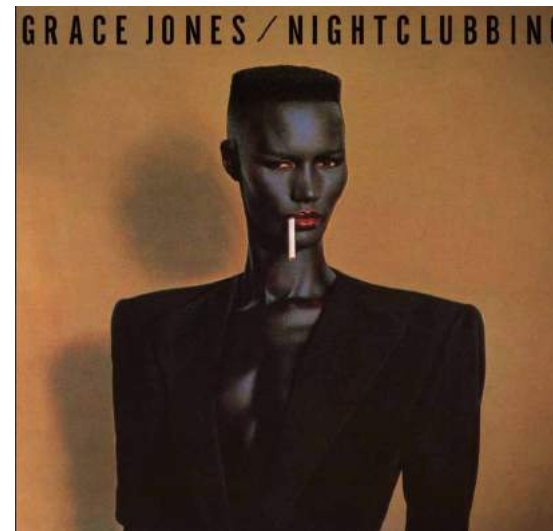
▶ *I've Seen That Face Before (Libertango)*

NK

It's been a really long time since I've seen that and really sat with it.

JG

I've always loved that the camera pans out at the end and you realize that you are actually on a rooftop. So I was really stuck with the decision of which media to choose for this, so

Grace Jones, *Nightclubbing* album cover (photographed by Jean-Paul Goude)

Stills from *I've Seen That Face Before (Libertango)* music video for Grace Jones (directed by Jean-Paul Goude, 1981)

I decided to start with re-reading Mark Fisher's *What is Hauntology?* He talked about the kind of tension between expectations raised by public broadcasting systems and popular culture that have a capacity to be challenging or experimental or avant-garde. And I thought about how Jean-Paul Goude and Grace Jones' collaboration led to this kind of new wave pop, but it was always involving the avant-garde in terms of art or the portrayal.

Another common thing that I found with the music of Burial, for example, is 'echoes' as a kind of common hauntological phenomenon. This piece of music I heard when I was a kid, I think in the eighties and I always loved this kind of echoing tremolo sound. And the fact that this is an echo in terms of it being a cover version, too. Thinking of cover versions as echoes that sound like the original, but are somehow changed and altered by the person who's performing the cover.

So originally, *Libertango* was an Argentine tango classic written by Astor Piazzolla and first recorded by the composer himself in 1974, then rearranged by Grace Jones into more of a reggae arrangement. The lyrics were written by her and Barry Reynolds, and lyrically it describes the darker side of Parisian nightlife. It's actually from an album titled *Nightclubbing*, which has this iconic cover. (Shows cover) So I thought of nightclubbing. I mean talking about Burial again, Burial to me sounds exactly like when I was a design student in London in the mid-to-late-nineties taking the night bus home after going to a club, and it would be like two in the morning. We lived on the outskirts of South London, that's where my college was, so it was often a two hour bus ride full of people who were wasted or drunk, and it was raining. I don't know, that's kind of what Burial's music sounds like to me. But also this idea of nightclubbing being the alternative side of urban life, so all of these ideas struck me when I thought about this video and this song.

There's this moment in the song when Grace Jones speaks, she's talking in French. In the first part of it, she's saying, "What are you looking for? To meet death? Who do you think you are? You also hate life." I think there is this

idea here of 'searching,' and, I don't know, it feels very loaded, and the song and the lyrics all feel quite hauntological in some ways to me.

SL

That's so interesting. I'm familiar with her music and love the art direction of her album covers and music videos, but never would have thought to think of it from a hauntological perspective until you mentioned these specific qualities and gestures of 'echoing.' It's fascinating to think of a cover version of a song as an echo of the original, now augmented into something totally new.

JG

Yeah, and I could be totally projecting, mis-applying the term, but there was something there to me. It was the first time I thought to actually look up the lyrics and see what she is saying, what the song is about. The song is about someone searching for her but hearing the sounds of bars and restaurants in the Parisian night, so everything with this quality of echos really struck me.

SL

The very last scene, with the zoom-out shot is so effective. Throughout the video you're in a dreamlike state, and the moment the camera zooms out and you see the reveal of the cityscape behind the backdrop, it feels a bit like coming back to reality, or waking up from a dream.

JG

The nice twist with this reality is that while the video starts with this very dramatic, performative, unmasking of Grace Jones from abstract forms, in that final return to reality it's revealed that the audience members are also wearing these abstract forms. So it's not just about the person on the stage: everyone is in the same costume.

James, love that point about the other place at the bar or within nightlife, and your own memories of nightlife. When you think of nightlife, or your past exploits as a student in London, do you have a nostalgia about the place at the bar or place at the club? Or the nightclub and what it meant?

It's weird: it's less the club itself, more the aftermath. The thing is, at the time it was the worst part: waiting and figuring out where your bus is going from Trafalgar Square, and then running for it and realizing you just missed it. It's raining and the next bus wasn't coming for an hour, or half an hour or something. At the time it was sort of terrible, but I had this weird sort of nostalgia for that sort of 'afterglow' or 'aftermath' of the club. And I wasn't a major clubber, I could probably count on both hands how many times I actually went clubbing. It was friends who pulled me along and I loved it, but didn't go that often. It blurs into one, the actual clubs, but it's always the afterglow of being on the bus and getting home that has sort of stayed in my memory.

I'm trying to remember specific clubs, we went to Heaven, went to Velvet Underground, a few different places. I wasn't quite old enough — Nora, your *What's In A Rave* essay that you sent us this morning really struck me as I read a little bit more, and the part of not being quite old enough — I think it was Evian Christ mentioning not being quite old enough to have gone to an actual rave. That was the same for me. I had cassette recordings of raves, like Grooverider tapes where you could hear the MC shouting "RUSH IT" over the music, because everyone was rushing on ecstasy. So I kind of imagined them but never went to any official raves. Like driving around the M25 looking for the site of a secret warehouse or whatever. So a lot of it is sort of secondhand experience through writing or reminiscing.

I feel like part of the reminiscence and narrative is about the finding and then the leaving, as well. All of that is just as important to the club or the scene, as what happens inside. My most distinct memories are of the time spent to find a flyer, or to get an email to prepare to find the place, to take a two hour bus somewhere. I remember when I was living in Iowa City in grad school, Chicago was three hours away. So just to get out of Iowa City and my grad program, I would take a bus by myself to go to Chicago, just to go see Matthew Dear or someone like him in a club by myself for a night and then get on the bus back at like, 8:00 AM. I remember the exhaustion and dread of leaving and generally, dread, for many reasons (*laughs*) I remember on the bus ride back, already wanting to recreate that experience the next time. Life was just time in-between going to the club or going to the next set. It was always all about the anticipation, the build up, and then the aftermath.

Yeah. It's funny. And it's also the same on the other side of it, I think with the bus ride. I mean once you get there then it's like the waiting outside, the queuing down the street before you get in or wondering if you're going to even get in, if the bouncers are going to let you in (*laughs*)!

So Nora, you are going next with your media content.

So actually before I saw your playlist, Sophie (which had the *Ghost In the Shell: Making of a Cyborg* on it), I also had the opening of *Ghost In the Shell 2: Innocence* in mind, so I'll play that next. You both know this opening I'm sure?

I haven't seen it in a while.

Yeah, in *a while*.

▶ *Ghost In the Shell 2: Innocence* title sequence

It's still one of the best openings of a film, I feel, that I've ever seen in terms of manga-inspired and science fiction films of that era. The three clips I am going to show today move from sci-fi nostalgia, to hopeful rave, to more of an acid Chicago vibe (*laughs*). Those are the three clips that I've been trying to link together. Every time I see this clip, I usually have to start writing immediately. I think, "Oh, I'm going to write the next big — I don't even know what it is."

That makes me think that for your writing maybe you always need to have an opening title sequence. Like, for an essay!

(*laughs*) Yeah, I want a title sequence for a book or an essay as good as this.

That should totally be a thing, and it should be you who should do it as well!

I have this in mind often, when writing, and I was thinking about nostalgia for watching a film for the first time, or nostalgia for receiving an opening sequence for the first time. I used to watch this in college with my two best friends

⌃

Stills from *Ghost In the Shell 2: Innocence* title sequence

at the time. One who was a poet, and another who was a game designer and game developer. So one of them would always be in Maya 3D, developing game environments. I guess college was really just sitting in a dorm room with the two of them, and watching this film over and over, many many times. Too many times to count. We would just have it on in the background, continually playing and this was so formative in creating a sense of a space that never changed.

So even if that was 15 years ago, I still think of this clip, this track, and this opening sequence as something that creates a space that doesn't change. I still feel the same excitement for it. The same "Yes, yes!" All the terrible things about technology that we already know of, and that I know I spend most of my time thinking about, I can put that all to the side and return to some original dream of what technology should be, or what rethinking ourselves or re-creating ourselves could be or could feel like. So in terms of nostalgic affect, I guess it always takes me to that same, not pure, space, but some kind of optimism about open architecture or hybridity. Or maybe it's just a nineties emotion. But with that pre-critical approach and, and feel for technological potential.

At the time, I was reading *Neuromancer;* technology was a mythical space. The soundscape this opening title sequence creates is just timeless. I feel like I can listen to it in ten years, or twenty, and it's still one continual, uninterrupted mental space, even though I'm changing. I can always return to this. I don't know if that makes it a 'sonic non-space' or what it is, exactly, but it's always a key, an emotional trigger. It creates a space that I can enter and then immediately go somewhere else. I always feel thrilled and delighted each time.

It's such a beautiful and emotive opening sequence. What I've always loved about *Ghost In The Shell* and the soundscape and world, is that it's set in the future but there's this quality of the deep past to it.

It is a visual world in which all of the social problems that we struggle with have been resolved. It is a society in which we've learned to live equitably and without causing minimum harm to each other. It's a very hopeful and positive track. I don't know if you both have seen *Prometheus*? But in that film, there is this deep time origin of all humanity which narrates and contains our needs as a species, maps how we kept progressing, and kept moving. I think the mythology of progress in this sequence feels different from the one that we're in now. It feels motivated by some collective desire to make ourselves greater or better or stronger or adaptive. So I think it really links to my imagining of productive cultural values. It's all in there, for me.

That makes sense. I think that this resonates with my second piece that I will show, I think this notion of ideal cultural values that have been lost. I think this is the big nostalgia for the future that everything pointed towards, but then it's just gone totally in the wrong direction. Humanity and its history and given the technology at our disposal, how could we not do anything but to make something that points towards positive shared culture. But somehow we still managed to mess that up.

And somehow it is the nineties, that was the moment at least — maybe because I was younger — that it feels like it was still heading in that right direction, and then now I just think, wow, what happened? (*laughs*) Then of course this is after the eighties which was just as bad in a way. So it was sort of partly just teenage nostalgia — well not teenage nostalgia, more like teenage naivete and only starting to understand how the world worked and how politics affected everything. When you were on the internet in the mid-nineties, you could assume that anyone else who was also in the internet sort of was hopefully a kind of vaguely decent person just because, not everyone knew about

it yet and so you had to jump through certain technological hoops — there was like an idea that we're all maybe geeks at a certain level?

Right. Unified by our deep, unique, very niche interest in one thing.

Yeah, exactly. The trolls hadn't arrived yet. I mean it was probably overwhelmingly white even then, but it was still this idea that, "well, I can probably chat to someone who I don't know and they're probably not going to be a bad person." (*laughs*) So that was part of that sort of moment of technology as a positive thing and imagining what we can do with it.

I think a lot of people cite that feeling of the early internet as being anarchic and free, a feeling of immense potential embedded within it. I think that was mechanically-speaking, a reality. The architecture of the internet was extremely open; it did feel a little bit like a wild west. Non-corporate. At the same time, in thinking about what I wanted to pick today, I wondered, can I look at my teenage nostalgia or a teenage naivete from an adult viewpoint, and re-evaluate this media based on what I know now? And when things hold up, I know that's a suggestion of something else — that it's not just about who I was back then, and what could have been. I think nostalgia can also be tempered, and re-evaluated too.

Even in this *Ghost In The Shell* opening, the vision that is being shown in the animation — it's a sort of 'cyborg fantasy' of us fusing with robots (*laughs*) and that's not actually what I'm hoping for. Is it a representation of empowerment through shedding of the body? That's a move I question and critique all the time now. So I'm trying to re-evaluate what it is about this film and soundtrack that hits me now, and to be critical of the nostalgia or reframe it.

It's so interesting to hear you both talk about the notion of nostalgia for a better time, because I also often feel this sense when watching films from the nineties. I romanticize the nineties as a time of more joy and hopefulness than right now. I also really find the aesthetics and color palette in *Ghost In the Shell* interesting because it's such a lush terrain — lush colorful terrain as opposed to the visions of the future that we see in science fiction now.

Yeah, similar to color palettes which are more representative in the Metahaven *Possessed* film for example. There was a really good Twitter thread that I'll dig up about sci-fi color palettes. I think David Rudnick tweeted it — one of my favorite Twitters.

(*laughs*) Mine too, it's so great.

(*laughs*) Yes it's very dark, very pessimistic, but awesome. He had this great thread about the tonal palettes in current-day sci-fi, which are dark, green, gray, really dusty kind of blues, representing the bleakness of the time.

That description that you were just reading from Rudnick reminds me of this term, 'Used Future.' I think that's what was radical about *Star Wars:* all the spaceships were already beaten up and all of the robots were rusty, as opposed to *Star Trek* where they were all sleek and shiny. Used Future is a nod to the audience, we all know the future's probably not going to be that great, it'll be rough. So that affects the color palette. It affects the tone of the stories. It sort of makes the future more real. Like the more sleek and perfect and utopian the future

is, the more unbelievable and unreal and more of a stretch it is for contemporary viewers to believe in it.

NK

Oh, what an amazing thought! So the warm palette of past sci-fi suggests a future that was attainable or a future in which people were actually living and dinging up aircraft?

JG

Yes, all the objects in the future had histories. I remember I went to the Epcot center when I was a kid and they had just opened "Star Tours," which was their slightly, not even VR but like this kind of glorified minivan, you know, you step into what looks like a minivan and it's like a little ride with a film connected to it that jolts you around. All of the props had that effect, you know, the way that Disney even stages the winding lines as you wait to go on a ride, to make sure you're not bored. Everything was like bashed up and that connected to me as a geeky kid: "Oh, it's just like the movies! Even though it's a brand new ride, I know it only opened just this year, but it already looks like it's been here for 200 years!" So there was something magical about that. The idea that the future has already had a past.

NK

There's an interview with William Gibson — I heard him talk in a church in Boston once and I brought all of my books to him to sign. (*laughs*) I had this whole speech set up to say, "Oh, you've meant everything to me, and thank you." I think I said all of that, and I remember he looked up at me, and it felt like he looked right through my face. Then he said thank you, and moved on. (*laughs*) I was a little bit crushed, but then afterwards, my friend said, "This is the person who came up with the ultimate superintelligence in *Wintermute,* what kind of person were you expecting?" So that was my one brush with William Gibson. But in the interview at the church, someone asked about the aesthetics

of *Neuromancer* and the aesthetics of *Pattern Recognition*, asking, "Why does everything feel so old in your books about the future?" And Gibson responded that he intentionally picks technologies that are 10 years out of date, so when he's writing any text he doesn't pick the technology of the current time to write about. He looks back at whatever came out 10 years ago, because he wants that intentionally gritty, textured feel in the narrative.

JG

It's sort of logical when you think about it. If everything's brand new in the future, it can't actually be that far away and it seems like we could have built it tomorrow, whereas if the future is already old, that pushes it even more distantly into the future. Paradoxically. It's the same deal with *Blade Runner* as well.

NK

Didn't we just pass the time that *Blade Runner* is set in?

JG

Yeah, 2019.

SL

So for my first media that I wanted to share, I chose the *Stranger Things* title sequence. James you mentioned you haven't seen *Stranger Things* yet, have you Nora?

NK

No I haven't actually.

SL

It's a great summer binge. I'll play it now.

Stills from *Stranger Things* title sequence

SL

I love this title sequence as a piece of emotive design but also in its power to evoke nostalgia. It's interesting to me that eighties nostalgia should be for gen-x, yet as a piece of design I think this so masterfully evokes a sense of nostalgia for the eighties even if you were not present in that time period. I think that's why the show is so successful. The title sequence, as seemingly simple as it feels, as a piece of design, is so masterfully done. Using type in this monumental way where it begins zoomed in and you just see these curves and lines with the red neon glow. It really sets the atmosphere for this supernatural eighties terrain that you are about to enter. Then as it zooms out the typography comes together. It's such a great setup for the show.

JG

There's a real sense of, because the way it's designed, that it's quite ominous. Obviously *Stranger Things* is mysterious and about things slowly being revealed. The ominous part of it is something that I feel is, again, a projection to the future. You're not quite sure what's going to happen and that feels scary most of the time.

NK

I really enjoy having to do a cold close read, having watched it only like for a couple of times now. I know people who have watched it often say it reminds them of their childhood, but I still haven't fully tuned into the conversation yet. I usually watch things three years too late — after everyone is done. (*laughs*) Then people will tell me, "All the discourse is done. There's nothing else you can add. Go away."

But this sequence reminds me of growing up in suburban Virginia — being isolated, having television, and the beginning of the internet. It reminds me of *The NeverEnding Story* and films from the eighties that were really eerie in the same way. There was this character in *The NeverEnding Story* called "The Darkness," which was a metaphor for something evil or existential — some sort of dread taking over humanity. S*tranger Things* reminds me of that. I don't know how to put words to that quite yet, but there's a distinct feel to this genre: *The Goosebumps Series*, *The X Files*, driving at night through the suburbs, the neon signs approaching from the distance — living in the real and metaphorical space between the city and the woods.

James, I don't know if they had this in the UK, but "stranger danger" was a big thing in the nineties here. The internet was starting up, and you would see warnings on the news, to the effect of, there are "bad people online, and strangers could grab you through the screen." People - parents - panicked that lurkers online were likely not who they seemed to be. Stories about serial killers, stuff you weren't supposed to see, like *48 Hours*, *20/20*, all the Late night True Crime hourlies. All of that.

JG

The scariest thing that I used to do — one of the rare things I used to watch together with my mum — was watching *Unsolved Mysteries.*

NK

I watched that with my mom, too.

JG

It opens with this drum beat and it's got this sinister riff — it puts chills down my spine even now. It very much has a similar vibe to *Stranger Things.*

SL

Yeah the typeface is supposed to be similar to the typeface used in Stephen King novels. Very intentional.

NK

I wrote down actually that it reminds me of Stephen King. Of *IT*. I think I skipped over *IT* because watching *IT* is a really scary memory for me — one of many things that my parents tried to make sure I didn't see. But of course I had a perverse fascination with it, and found some way to watch everything that I wasn't supposed to see.

JG

Yeah. Same for me. I mean, the parents trying to hide it from me makes it even more desirable and ominous and fascinating.

NK

Is *Stranger Things* about children solving mysteries?

SL

I feel like it's a mix mash of a lot of sci-fi references. All of it is in there. There's *Star Wars*, *X- Men*, what else?

JG

E.T.? I get an *E.T.* vibe from it. Like, going into the forest and discovering scary things.

SL

I feel like you will find a reference point to all of the classic eighties and nineties science fiction films. It's very atmospheric. The music has a lot to do with that. Just the nostalgia that it evokes, I find really fascinating.

JG

Is it spooky sci-fi or does it veer into actual horror?

SL

I'm not the best person to ask about that because I'm a horror fan...

JG

...I can't watch horror movies.

SL

To me it's not horror at all, (*laughs*) but someone else might say it's the scariest thing they've ever seen.

SL

James should we move to your second media piece?

JG

Let's see... (Share screen.)

So, now I have what has turned out to be a Requiem. Sophie, I don't know how familiar you are with Massive Attack or with this particular album (*Protection*, 1994).

SL

Not this particular album, actually. *Mezzanine* is the one I discovered Massive Attack with, and from there I have been a fan.

JG

Yeah, that was a bit later. It's their second album: Nora, I guess you probably know it?

NK

Yeah. I love this album.

JG

It's one of my favorites. The cover is great. It's by Michael Nash Associates — who people don't really know about — but they did lots of really cool album covers. They were my favorite graphic designers when I was a student in London. They did the cover for *Blue Lines*, Massive Attack's debut album, which had the flammable symbol on it. And now with the second album, the flammable symbol on the cover seems to have caught alight or something. It's damaged.

This came out in 1994. I had just moved to London. You know, my whole childhood, we moved around every two years. We were living in Wales at that point, having moved from Australia to Sweden, then Denmark, then New Zealand, and then Wales. I finished high school and couldn't wait to get away from my family, and to go to London to study design. So I arrived in 1994. This album came out autumn '94 and was one of the major soundtracks for me at that time. On the cover there's this symbol — this kind of weird 3D symbol with a knife, a fork, and stars around its head: a character called "Eurochild." Designed by Robert del Naja, AKA "3-D," one of the members of Massive Attack, and also a graffiti artist.

It's also the title of the song I'd like to play: *Eurochild*. I'll play it. It very much touches on what we were talking about earlier. 1994 was this moment where the UK just became part of Europe. '93 was the Treaty of Maastricht. That really triggered the EU being a thing, and it felt like, OK, the UK is finally admitting that they're part of Europe. It was a moment of real hope and optimism, and, to me, a new kind of futuristic time.

My parents moved from Wales to Düsseldorf while I was at college. So having moved to college from Wales, I then drove Düsseldorf to see my parents at Christmas time. Driving European expressways, listening to this album to go to my parents' new home and the idea of: wow, I'm in Europe now. This is the future. Everyone's together. And then very quickly it became a requiem, post-Brexit.

▶ Massive Attack:
Eurochild

Massive Attack, *Protection* album cover
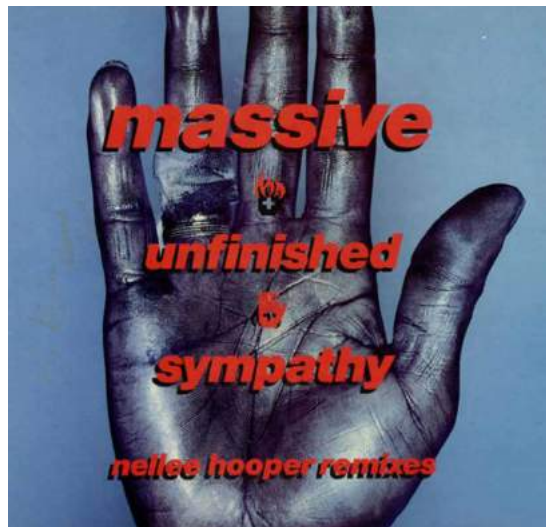
Massive Attack, *Unfinished Sympathy* single

So I was mentioning the optimism that I had. Even though I've always found this quite a haunting track. I was reading Fisher's *What is Hauntology?* and there was this line that resonated, helping me unpack this song a little bit. I'm just going to quote him: "The actual future would not be popular modernism but populist conservatism." By 1997, there was a real optimism. Tony Blair, Labour came back into power in the UK and we thought, okay, great. Finally conservatism is over. But little did we know it was a totally new, even more potent form of conservatism, that came in. Fisher: "The actual future would not be popular modernism, but populist conservatism. The creative destruction unleashed by the forces of business on the one hand, the return to familiar aesthetic and cultural forms on the other."

I think some of the lyrics are very hauntological. "I've seen the city somewhere / I'm looking out for no one / Activating the remote, putting the BBC on." This presence of the BBC as a trustworthy source, or at least a kind of utopian presence in a lot of British culture, but even that deteriorated a lot in recent years. So for me, the song was a marker of a time of hope, like I was saying. Massive Attack's slick, modern atmospheric production matched the mood of the time, the zeitgeist. Driving home for semester breaks from London. At the time, along with the new Europe, there was also the new Euro Tunnel. I could just drive straight onto a shuttle that would take you from Folkestone to Calais, then you'd drive off again and straight onto the expressways to drive through northern France, across Belgium, and then into Germany. To Düsseldorf, where my parents were — the home of Kraftwerk — listening to Massive Attack (and sometimes Kraftwerk). It was a clear lineage of something that at least then felt new. An exciting futuristic evolution from Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express* in my car on Trans-Europe expressways. This still brings it all back to me, listening to this album and particularly *Eurochild*. 1994 was also the first year I had access to the internet.

When I remembered that this was from 1994, it all came back.

Again, you know, Fisher talked about the failure of the future: "By 2005, it was becoming clear that electronic music could no longer deliver sounds that were futuristic." Whereas for us back here in '94, this still felt futuristic. The fact that it was mixing all of the references that I loved — it had hip hop, rap... Horace Andy, a Jamaican dancehall singer, covers his own song on *Protection*, called *Spying Glass*, which is super prescient. In my mind it predicts surveillance capitalism and Facebook. If we have time to digress, I can read some *Spying Glass* lyrics. *Spying Glass* is one of my all time favorite tracks.

Then, Fisher continues, he says: "Hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time. And so the erosion of speciality is..." — Fisher describes French philosophy Mark Aug. He wrote *Non-Places*, which was a major book for me in my graduate graphic design studies at the RCA. I was obsessed with this book and was really into photographing airports, no-man's lands — spotting the now defunct border crossings as you drove through Belgium. You would still drive through where a year previously you would have been stopped, and now you could just sail through. So there were these zones which were neither France nor Belgium for example. Anyway, I could go on about that.

Fisher, again: "The disappearance of space goes alongside the disappearance of time. There are non-times as well as non-places." Nora, I liked how you're getting at... there's non-music too in that sense. If there's a non-place and a non-time, then there's non-music. Sort of how you were describing the *Ghost In The Shell* soundtrack. It's the most epic, uplifting, exciting, ominous music. But it could be from any time — non-music in that sense.

The reason *Eurochild* now becomes a requiem is that during Massive Attack's set in 2016 at the British Summertime Festival — right after the EU referendum results in the UK—3D from Massive Attack stated on stage as they launched into *Eurochild*: "We didn't expect to be seeing this 20 years later as a requiem."

What really struck me here was that all of the hope and excitement of being European is completely drained from the UK now.

That was my little epiphany of listening to this again. *Eurochild* has always been haunting to me, and realising that it's the story of the last 20 years of British politics in a way as well.

It's very personal. You know, the timeline of me being a student — that moment of being wide open to everything and being excited about the possibilities. What kind of world are you going to live in when you graduate?

I'm reading Fisher's *Hauntology*, and thinking about a mix of different genres at once. Trip hop in general, as you mentioned, is a mixture of different sounds and it seems like maybe it's unconsciously put together. Like an unconscious mixing. But for Massive Attack, in this case, it's very conscious. They're really thinking about all the layers that they're combining together.

You've got orchestral, hip hop, scratching, rapping, reggae, electronic. These are all established music typologies and approaches, but the way they use it feels very futuristic or at least it did at the time.

Do you think it's this layering of times and sounds that aren't supposed to go together — the collapsing of this that creates the hauntological?

Definitely. I think the fact that they did it in a way that wasn't actually dissonant. They were criticized on a certain level for this. In the UK, this was exactly what you would hear in a kind of upper middle class dinner party. You know, put on Massive Attack to seem a little bit like

you have your finger on the pulse. It was with very slick production, so it always had this kind of dissonance.

It doesn't have the dissonance in the actual meshing of different genres. But they were a sound system from the streets in Bristol—working class kids, a collective called The Wild Bunch. It very much became co-opted. I can't remember if Massive Attack were invited, but Tony Blair invited all the cool bands to 10 Downing Street, you know, this time of "Cool Britannia" when he was made prime minister. Everyone latched on to British music and co-opted it.

NK

Aren't the Massive Attack members very politically engaged to you? They're known for being more engaged than most superstars. Right?

JG

Very much so. I don't imagine they would've gone to Downing Street. They would've told Blair to fuck off.

NK

Something that struck me when you were having this narrative of the last 10, 15 years—I'm thinking about listening to this album and to Massive Attack and then trying to reconcile their political term—I've seen some images of their news generator concerts recently and they've always felt very dissonant to me because my removed nostalgia of Massive Attack is a very slick matrix-cosmopolitan-UK-patchwork-urban scene. Not necessarily London, but some city in which things were happening. But the production was so smooth. The sound production is so high that the smoothness of it felt in disjunct with the turn to politics later. I had a hard time aesthetically fitting the music with a political stance—sometimes with techno often and with ambient music. I feel Burial is an exception. That's why *Come Down to Us* made such splashes and was saying something about identity in a very

clear way. A lot of these soundscapes—especially Massive Attack—I could set to anything. Often the soundscape was designed to be with this idea of non-music to set to non-place. You could listen to it anywhere. You can listen to in a Starbucks, you could listen to a bedroom, at a dinner party, and it would set a tone or a vibe that you could project anything else onto. But for you, as you were describing, it was very contextual, very political, very culturally rooted to a place, and an economic turn. So that tension is in a lot of the smoother high production tracks.

JG

Yeah, totally. I think my all time favorite song is still *Unfinished Sympathy*, which was on their first album, *Blue Lines*. And the video too, which was unexpected. They're from Bristol, they're Bristol kids. They shot this single take video in the streets of LA with Shara Nelson—who is an incredible singer—just walking along singing, which is a really remarkable video. It's worth checking out. Listen to *Spying Glass* and listen to the lyrics as well. Horace Andy is a singer who I love. It's all about "minding your own business" and being spied on "because he's Rasta." It's really chilling when you think about it now.

My last digression: *Spying Glass*, this struck me about cover versions. There is something about the notion of the cover version to me being hauntological in a certain sense. *Karmacoma* is another fantastic song from *Protection*, with Tricky rapping on that as well. It reminded me of one of my favorite filmmakers, Wong Kar-wai, and his film *Fallen Angels*. I don't know if either of you have seen that film. Wong Kar-wai at that time really utilized repetition. There would be like recurring songs on repeat in his films—The Mamas and the Papas's *California Dreaming* in *Chungking Express*, and then in *Fallen Angels* there's this weird sort of either heavily sampled or covered version of *Karmacoma*. I always leisurely thought, oh, maybe it's a Cantonese version—there was this rapping in another language. I looked it up today and it's actually a Madagascan singer

and multi-instrumentalist who moved to Hong Kong. It's actually a song called *Because I'm Cool*, which plays as an assassin goes about carrying out his hits. They play this song and it keeps repeating through the subways of Hong Kong and on expressways. Like a motorbike riding on expressway with this weird echoing version of *Karmacoma*. For me, that was another strange cover version that feels very atmospheric for Hong Kong in the nineties. Anyway, lots of digressions as I was getting into each of these tracks and thinking about other films, echoes, or other songs or versions of songs.

NK

I'll briefly transition to my second media. You started me thinking on how I got into techno, or electronic music. About what we might share of our electronic music pasts—one commonality was a taste thing, especially with heavy-into-techno people, a fetish for the most obscure track. "This cut of a cut of a cut that you haven't heard on this record from ___." I would say my start with techno was in this vein, which is kind of shameful, but common. In high school, my cousin gave me some trance and progressive house CDs. I was a big house head from, I would say, 2001 to 2006.

I mean, *great New York house* like Danny Tenaglia. There's that qualification! In college, I would go down to Miami for the *Ultra* music festival which was just a shit show (*laughs*). So I did that for three years with my college roommate, and we would fly down. *Ultra* is this big, huge, light show madness, but slowly, within pockets of that festival, I found people and DJs who had come down to *Ultra* for the conference to talk about gear or the newest industry-type things. The business of techno, panels on the craft. So I would find these little corners to hide away in and ended up learning. And there were strange, interesting DJs who would have these strange little sets off to the side of the festival. It was at one of the off-site things that I started to learn about Detroit DJs and Chicago producers.

I remember first going to see Matthew Dear (Ghostly International) for the first time. He was playing in a hole in the wall, some sort of acid-inspired track, and I had never heard acid before. I remember I pulled my friend to the side, and asked frantically, "What is this? What is this sound that he is playing?" and he said, casually, "Oh this is acid—like Chicago? Acid—" and I had no idea what he was talking about. (*laughs*) So from there I started to go down this rabbit hole of learning about the history of techno, its origins, and so I started to learn backwards, in my early twenties, about where techno came from.

JG

Same for me.

NK

Yeah. Which is so interesting, how we learn. Learning about the history of the sound through travel, through other people's tastes. And later on searching for the root or the origin.

JG

I love that moment of learning on the floor—like on the dance floor.

NK

(*laughs*) Yeah it's always a, "What is this sound?" That introduction to acid, especially, which is already abrasive, hypnotic, was so visceral. You feel it in your body immediately. And I remember thinking, I don't know what this is, but it is grimy, unfinished, and for reasons I can't articulate, I want to be near more of this kind of sound, whatever it is. I learned I love great production and a nearly empty room, which was equal to being in a huge crowd losing its mind. I would learn I love German techno, and that I love the experimenters in Berlin. But back then, I mostly collected a lot of Fabric CDs and imagined clubs elsewhere. A lot of people burnt CDs for me.

In undergrad-, I tutored in a Prison Education program, and there was this other volunteer who burnt all of Jeff Mills and Richie Hawtin's PlastikMan CDs for me. It felt like every bus ride, this person would give me a new CD and say, now, "Here's another part of the history you have to learn." I think this was the only time I let myself be mansplained to. Never again, right? (*laughs*) I felt this clear disjunct and gap between my experience of the music and all of this history that I needed to catch up on. I needed to learn everything about this music. So I started to go to Detroit to *Movement*, the music festival there. From 2006 to 2010 or so. Early on, *Movement* had been free from 2000 to 2002, I think. But it was still affordable. And there was a window to see Jeff Mills, Richie Hawtin, and Carl Craig, and many Detroit legends playing. Formative, for me, for my writing and thinking. Never saw Underground Resistance there; I never got to see them play until last year, when they gave a panel discussion at Performance Space New York.

JG

Oh that sounds amazing.

NK

Their panel was set up with them first playing live, and then stopping to talk. It was really nice.

JG

I once commissioned a photo shoot of Underground Resistance. They were on the cover of *The Wire*, I art directed *The Wire* for a couple of years I couldn't be there for the shoot, because we shot them in Detroit and I was in London but it was great. I remember them being really careful, of course they didn't want (UR co-founder) "Mad" Mike Banks's face to be revealed. So there negotiations and back and forth with them, us, and the photographer.

NK

That's actually a perfect segue. I'll share my screen. (Shares images of Underground Resistance)

NK

It was around this time that I started to learn about Underground Resistance. I feel like I've seen this image a lot in the last few years (fig 1). I'd seen this image (fig 2) much earlier and it was in sharp contrast to how I semi-idolized a lot of techno DJs at the time. So many were big stars — it was a hero culture, where people want to be close to the DJ, and to be seen. I would get my dumb dollar bills signed by them at the end of a set. (*laughs*) There was this infectious idolatry which was absurd. I did really look up to them, but in retrospect I think I mostly admired and studied the feeling they could create on the dance floor. But when I saw these images of Underground Resistance, I started to read about the history of techno in Detroit. Even as I was going to Detroit, there was so much I didn't know as an outsider. I would eventually live there, eight years later; we lived a few blocks from Submerge Records. But then, I was going straight downtown and into the all-important afterparties around the festival. I was going for the sound, and the feeling, or maybe suspicion, that the sound clued me into something else. I didn't quite know what, and I didn't have words for it. I just had too much to learn about what techno meant in Detroit.

Now, I get that this sound was connected to political and aesthetic interests that I would continue to return to: interests in futurity, in technological adaptation, in creating new systems out of the failures of the old. First, Detroit techno was such a pure, extreme, alien sound. I began to hear it as a political sound. The music wasn't just about a party, even though the party, the gathering, was a huge part of it. Party as communing. As healing. As hopeful. As unabashedly spiritual. The sound constructed a space, a place, a sense of possibility.

Fig |1| Underground Resistance Live Set

Fig |2| Underground Resistance Live Set

Galaxy 2 Galaxy – *Hi-Tech Jazz* (Live Version) Vinyl

Techno had a way to one, get people into abandoned spaces and also start to think of a kind of sound that was generative, that built up community and was political strategy in the face of foreclosures and industry collapse, in a city where the American Dream was supposed to work.

Underground Resistance has had many different iterations. So they have a fairly relentless, hard sound. They also have a very futuristic sound. They've gone through different phases. So I wanted to just show a little clip of their manifestation as "Galaxy 2 Galaxy", playing *Hi-Tech Jazz*. This festival *Metamorphose* which was held close to Mt. Fuji in Japan. 2005.

Galaxy 2 Galaxy
Hi-Tech Jazz (Live)

JG

Wow that's great.

NK

It's so good (*laughs*) I was not there, but this happens at right as the sun is rising. Why do I keep returning to it? I'm telling this gauzy story about festivals, travel. Going to see techno music was a way out into urbanity, out of suburban life. It was also the sound of futurity, for me, the sound of wild creativity. I was starting to figure out what it means for me to be a writer, as opposed to a PhD student, or a lawyer, or whatever other paths I was supposed to take (*laughs*). Because of where I was in life, I needed a sense of community. Writing is very lonely. There is a writing community, but my MFA was in Fiction so it was all very staid. A kind of spartan, solitary lifestyle keeping the world at a remove. Not what was in that clip (*laughs*). Techno gave me a different world. It was a way to see the world, the rest of the States. In my mind, through these clips,

through research of music, I had portals. I was invited to construct a world around that alien sound. To ask, "what is it" and then go in search of *it*. Following this opened my life up to everything I would be invested in, later. I wanted to lean towards it and developed a creative practice along the edges, in the spaces that felt like that sound.

I started interviewing musicians making computational music, writing on generative and simulated sound, and politically, was driven by critical, alternative ways of imagining technology. Underground Resistance was really key to that as they've been doing that work from their genesis. They have been speaking on this. UR has often told the story of making the technology do what they want - finding this expensive equipment, synthesizers at pawn shops, and tinkering. Accident as a way in, as access. Reprogramming as a way of creating community, political affinity, joy, and elevation. There was a serious ethic around creating community through this rough, un-precious use of technology. And this ethic, from the local Detroit community, has been channeled and distributed and evolved in so many places. Why does one keep returning to a past sound? Sometimes it turns out to have clues for the present moment. It turns out to be more rooted and consistent than imagined. A constant sound driven by a persistently articulated ethic. Living in Detroit brought the sound around for me, in a full decade long loop. Detroit in winter, in particular, has a harshness, that helps you understand where that alien sound would come from. Out of situations of extreme boundaries, come extreme ideas, extreme sounds. Beauty, out of limits.

SL

Wow, there's so much positive energy and joy that I felt just from watching that clip and the nostalgia that I feel for spaces like this. Nora, I loved what you said about the notion of moving backwards to discover the history of techno or just having to do that work of moving backwards to really understand why you are drawn to certain things, and discovering the history behind it. Things that speak to you but you're not quite sure where it comes from, what it all means. It's also fascinating to hear the history of techno from Detroit because I lived in Chicago for three years, and sort of in passing I heard that the birthplace of techno is right next door and I remember being curious about that and wanting to know more of that history but I never got a chance to dive into it. I've thought a lot about techno and why I am drawn to the sounds of it, and I remember a few years ago in Iran my uncle brought out this huge box of cassette tapes and he said "I used to play all of this for you as a child" and I looked through the box and it was mostly electronic music, techno, Pet Shop Boys, Kraftwerk and I remember thinking "oh okay, so that's where this interest originated from without me even knowing it."

NK

Yes. And even as we discover the history, we find the depth of the lacks, why threads of the history are not more widely known. There's a reflection here of how history in most fields tends to go. The official history, versus the more complex origins of movements, which are often obscured for a grand narrative. I feel only in the last clutch of years has Detroit been given its due on a wider international stage. I think Underground Resistance and a bunch of techno producers from Detroit went to Berlin for a conference on the exchanges between Detroit and UK, European techno. How does one do restorative history? How does one start to fill in the gaps, or thread together loud and quiet histories in wildly different places? We see this in the iconography and typology of rave posters. This was the education, the learning that moved it beyond a party. I have a hard time just relaxing and hanging out. There has to be some kind of reason, concept, meaning (*laughs*).

JG

Yeah me too. I mean I think that's the joy of music that we're all talking about — the notion of the portal, of the latent educational capacity of any piece of music. The way you talked about it, felt very familiar to me: hearing something and realizing there's a lot that you have to still learn and discover. But it's exhilarating, knowing "oh my god, there's still so much more amazing stuff that's waiting for me" and that you've got to keep digging. I love the example you gave of Underground Resistance doing a set that's combined with a panel.

That's such a great format, and it reminded me of what might be my all time favorite lecture, which was actually a DJ Premier gig in London. I don't know when this was, it might've been the late nineties, but it was just DJ Premier and there was no support group or whatever, and I remember thinking, "Well, what's he going to do? Just play a DJ set? That'll probably be amazing." So my friend and I bought tickets, but it was really DJ Premier with these two turntables, schooling everyone. Starting first with seventies dance hall reggae, telling us all "If you don't know this shit, you don't know hip hop!" (*laughs*). He then took everyone through the whole lineage of hip hop before finally — and at that point the crowd exploded — he started playing Gang Starr tracks which is what I think everyone had gone there for, but essentially he gave a lecture, a history lecture, and it was amazing.

I've been trying to list these kinds of examples, of what might be considered "lectures," for myself. I'm slowly trying to formulate a project that investigates the format of the lecture and how that can be experimented with. That's sort of what I'm trying to do with my *Pop Culture Color Theory* talk and with trying to bring more music into my own lectures. The panel slash set is another one that I'm going to add to the list.

NK

Ah, wow - you'll have to add this one in! The theater must have been a school auditorium, I think; Performance Space was formerly P.S. 122. Cornelius Harris DJ'd "Strings of Life," and the group said, "You need to stand, you need to get up." People stood, a bit uncertain, expecting the lecture. They kept playing, and there was a dance party standing in our seats. Before the panel about the music. I'll find a recording of it for you.

JG

Oh yeah, I'd love that. That sounds great. So Sophie, you have your next media piece for us?

SL

So actually in the interest of time James do you mind going next? I want to make sure we get to all the media pieces you both brought in, I'm much more interested in that (*laughs*).

JG

Sure, actually this next one I don't have so much of a digression so i'm happy to just jump into that, I'll share my screen.

So I mentioned for today I had a cover version, a requiem and then a trailer. So the trailer is one that I thought of quite early on. I've given a whole lecture about this. There was an event, a series of film screenings, at Black Cinema House in Chicago years ago when I lived there and I did a night on kind of hauntological film and played Patrick Keiller's films, a British filmmaker. So for your project here, Sophie, I immediately thought, "Oh, I'll play the trailer." It's one that I've always loved, the trailer for *Robinson In Ruins*. This is the third in a trilogy of films about England that Patrick Keiller had made. As I was re-reading Mark Fisher's "What is Hauntology?," I realized why I remembered this, that of course Fisher writes about *Robinson In Ruins* briefly at the end of that essay. Do you both know Patrick Keiller's films? He had a trilogy of films: the first was London, the second was Robinson in Space and the third is *Robinson In Ruins*. I can give you a very, very brief summary.

So Patrick Keiller, he's a film essayist, part historian, part poet, part landscape photographer and he made a series, — this is where I got into my lecture, — which was basically a trilogy of pseudo–documentary films,

with the protagonist being a fellow called Robinson. Each film's release kind of aligned with times in my life in the UK. So '1994 was the release of London, also when I moved to London and started college, which was a beautiful meditative documentary, a kind of literary and cultural documentary of London as a city. Then in 1997, when Tony Blair and New Labour came into power and the year I graduated from my undergrad program, *Robinson In Space* came out, which kind of zoomed out from London to cover the entire English countryside. Then finally when I moved from Europe to the U.S in 2010, much later on, the final part of the trilogy *Robinson In Ruins* came out. Very briefly, each of these films presents a narrator who in voiceover recounts the meanderings of Robinson, an unseen scholar, government advisor, and avid seeker of obscure places of historical importance or, as he puts it, "sites of his special scientific interest." "Places to haunt," as you'll hear in this trailer. So I'll play it, the trailer for Robinson In Ruins — interestingly, while the narrator for the first two films was famed English actor Paul Scofield, he passed away in the interim between the second and third final film. So here you'll hear Vanessa Redgrave, also a renowned English actor, playing the role as a female narrator as opposed to the male in the first two. This may or may not make any sense, but in itself, the trailer is beautifully cut and edited, and if you listen to the voiceover, I find it (and the script) very hauntological. As an aside, I also sometimes include this trailer as part of my argument for the legitimacy of bad typography in typography lectures. The titles were quite nice for London but for *Robinson In Ruins* it looks like they designed the titles in PowerPoint (*laughs*), you'll see what I mean in a second here.

▶ **Robinson In Ruins**
official trailer

So these investigations mentioned in the trailer often involve the so-called "problem of England," and particularly in *Robinson In Ruins*. The problem encompasses Britain's collusion with the United States military industrial complex. You often see in the distance, you know, U.S. military bases in the English landscape. He often has these very deceptively simple still frames, just a view, often for minutes at a time. In one of my favorite scenes, there's a British motorway sign pointing to the North and to various cities. And one of the other arrows is simply directing you to "Toyota" because there happens to be a factory nearby.

My Black Cinema House lecture admittedly dealt with psychogeography more than hauntology, but I realized that Keiller himself doesn't really think of his work as "psychogeographical." But for me, I was connecting it to a particularly English psychogeographic tradition. I don't know if you've gotten into psychogeography at all, Sophie, with your investigations, but there are British writers and historians like Ian Sinclair who was another influential writer for me, who released a book called *Lights Out for the Territory* when I was a student. He also has another book called *London Orbital*, where he actually walks the M25, around the entire orbital motorway that encircles almost all of greater London.

It takes you hours to drive. If you drive anywhere from one side of London to the other, you often have to drive onto part of the M25 to then get back into another point. It's what Orbital, the group, named themselves after, because it was from there, the London orbital, the M25, that you would often access raves. You would have to go on the M25 and then drive off somewhere down into Kent. So my lecture, and the poster I designed, referred to Patrick Keiller's psychogeography, but he himself has kind of disavowed that. It's like an exploration of urban environments, dividing historical and mythical and spiritual kinds of presences through navigating the terrain.

Fisher wrote, "Patrick Keiller's Robinson trilogy offers a different take on hauntology and landscape. In one respect, the Robinson films can be seen as a study of the rise of Post-Fordist England. The England Keiller is rising from the wreckage of industrialism is a deterritorialized zone and a non-place that is seen as in its very anonymity."

So all of these contemplative still shots of various locations in the UK are usually unpacked through simply pointing out what you're seeing, and it very quickly becomes ominous about this sinister nature that is ambient or latent in the pastoral landscapes of England. Just as a little side note, I was inspired by Keiller's films when I was invited to participate in an exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of the British road signage system for the Design Museum in London a few years ago. One other note is, just to kind of signal what you need to look out for in Keiller's films: his character Robinson often, in a very humorous, kind of pompous sort of way, refers to literary figures. So even here, this lichen on there on the road signage (in a still from the trailer), this resembles the side profile of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. For example, maybe I can show you, that's another reference that I made to, I think I've got it here in one of my — sorry to jump into my own portfolio website, but I think I've got the poster for my lecture at Black Cinema House somewhere here. Yeah, this one (fig 3). So I put the Goethe head there, but embedded a fenced-off military base inside Goethe's head as a signal. Here's the Toyota road sign as well. For the Design Museum, I then made a real road sign, this pastoral warning sign (fig 4). Everyone was invited to reinterpret the British signage system for the motorways. So I wanted to take things literally, pulling various signs and symbols from the official motorway signage manual, and positioning everything at the same size. So it became a surrealist landscape — a rambler (hiker) walking past a giant duck and massive butterflies and so on. Stonehenge, et cetera.

So Patrick Keiller's films, they're very, very English. They're quite camp as well. Robinson is walking and exploring all of these

Stills from *Robinson In Ruins* official trailer

landscapes with his unnamed male companion. And they do a bit of cruising here and there at various sites. So it's very British, very unusual, but a very interesting kind of study of landscape and corporate ownership and basically the gradual ceding of sublime landscapes to military and commercial concerns. The fact that the final part of the trilogy found everything in "ruins" was kind of pointing towards this decline that has been documented in and sustained in these kinds of paradoxically beautiful landscapes. Like a critical moving picture essay.

SL

This reminds me of a term I stumbled on recently, "involuntary parks" by Bruce Sterling. An area previously inhabited now returned to an overgrown natural "wild or feral state." He uses examples such as Chernobyl or The Korean Demilitarized Zone.

JG

Involuntary policy investment. So that would segue to Nora. You offered…

NK

Yes, one more set! I wanted to end on fun. I was here thinking on the narratives that we build up around the myth of a certain style of music or the myth of *needing to have been there*. How your life would have been different if you were just there at that moment. Falling into this hole of trying to be in Detroit, close to it. Of course I didn't get any closer to any of it and it all became more and more elusive as I tried — but I learned about a culture and a style of music, and I learned lineages. I had great, life-altering experiences. But I don't think I got any closer to the thing I sought. "Chasing a sound" is the best way I can describe it. And the places that *Movement* led me were generative in terms of collaborators, finding people who were thinking, chasing in the same way.

Fig [3] *Object* for Black Cinema House Chicago, James Goggin, 2013

Fig [4] *Pastoral Warning Sign* for Design Museum, James Goggin, 2015

I've come back around to acid in trying to close the loop of searching, opening back into, "what is this sound?" Phuture is known for creating the first acid track. But, I believe, Phuture had not been seen playing live or together for a really long time. Until 2014. Well, I had never really seen any footage of them playing, so there was just always an idea of what it would be like to experience Phuture. I watched it live with my dad. The only Boiler Room set that I've ever been able to get through (*laughs*). I guess the memory of sitting and watching it, listening to it together, will remain.

JG

Amazing, I thought I misheard you at first, "he didn't…."

NK

Right! (*laughs*) My dad is a serious person and does not tend to sit around watching Boiler Room sets. This is the first memory I have listening to music that I liked with them. We sat and talked through it together. He had asked something like, "What is this thing that you're so obsessed with? We've been hearing you talk about it for a long time, but I still have no sense of what that is." We listened to Phuture, and I tried to key him into certain points, and asked, "Do you hear that part? Or do you hear *that* turn or that abrasive bit, that kind of, rupture?" I think he started to get it, or maybe he was just humoring me, but it seemed like he was. So I'll just play a few minutes.

JG

Yeah, I didn't know this existed!

NK

Oh it's so great. You have to, you have to listen to the whole thing after.

Phuture Boiler Room
Chicago live set

NK

I'm trying to fade it out slowly, because it feels really disrespectful just to abruptly end. That final track *Jack in My House* is of course so loved, used and endlessly sampled and remixed. Paired with the Phuture sound. all of them wearing shirts with the print of that first acid record, and then watching this in 2014 — so many layers of time, remove, imagining a past community around a first sound. I remember having a distinct moment of nostalgia for something I've not been part of. The past set and sound become a way to get to the core of the present, in a way. Hauntology is then, in part, about seeing the possibility of a political moment, the dream of escaping a past failed structure. Nostalgia, bringing us around to confronting the present. Hearing a sound from '87, that passage with the siren, which is used in *Silent Hill* as well (*laughs*). That aggressive rupture that comes from sound, that helps you confront the moment, puts what's happening right here and now into view. What is that rupture, and how to keep finding it? There's no tidy close to this. Maybe I didn't get any *closer* to anything, but I did come to find other people, and I found an orientation to so much outside of myself, so much beyond what I'd imagined possible for my life, through the sound. Through that rupture, that break.

SL

Wow, that was a really fantastic Boiler Room set (*laughs*).

NK

No one annoying in the background (*laughs*).

Phuture Boiler Room Chicago Live Set

Phuture – *Acid Tracks* Vinyl

JG

That's even better. Yeah, you can see something I'm obsessed with—I never got one, but I've always wanted an Akai MPC and they've got an MPC right there, which is usually more frequently used by hip hop producers. They're still very old school with the way they split the set up..

NK

And they're respectful of the set up! Even when that one friend came in, he smoothly moved away after it (*laughs*).

JG

Yeah. I love that, I did not know that this existed. This is so great, especially that you watched it with your dad. I'm trying to imagine something similar. One miraculous thing I managed to do was when I was in high school and my dad was

doing business trips to the U.S. from Wales, and he asked if I wanted anything and I gave him a list of CD's that I wanted. My parents are religious, but I gave my dad a list where I wanted, you know Wu-Tang's *36 Chambers* and somehow he actually went somewhere in Boston and then bought them and then had no clue really what I was listening to, I think! (*laughs*).

NK

That's what I did with a lot of games (*laughs*).

JG

I was trying to imagine what if I had invited my dad to listen to the entire album! I don't think I would have gotten far (*laughs*).

SL

Thank you both so much for this incredible

and insightful conversation. I feel there's so many amazing rabbit holes and portals that just opened for me to delve into as I further research the hauntological.

JG

I appreciate it. I mean I feel honored that you invited me, so thank you very much. Also appreciate this opportunity to hear a lot more from Nora too. I really got a lot out of what you have to say.

NK

Thanks James, and thank you for joining as well. I love hearing what you have to say, and I hope we can collaborate in the fifth space in the future. Sophie, thank you! It's been such an honor and a pleasure to be a source of advice through this whole process, and I'm really excited for you.

SL

Thank you both so much for your time, the sources and media that you shared and for your memories. This was such a rich conversation.

NK

Beautiful. I'm very happy. Thank you, Sophie. Thanks James.

⏸

James Goggin

James Goggin is a Providence-based British and/or Australian graphic designer from London via Sydney, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Auckland, Arnhem, and Chicago. He runs a design practice named Practise together with partner Shan James, working on typefaces, posters, magazines, books, videos, websites, exhibitions, systems, signs, and symbols in Europe, Asia, Australasia, and North America. James teaches at Rhode Island School of Design, writes now and then, and lectures here and there.

Nora N. Khan

Nora N. Khan is a writer and editor of criticism on digital visual culture and philosophy of emerging technology. Her writing practice extends to a range of artistic collaborations, from libretto to short films, to a tiny house. She is a critic on the Digital + Media faculty at Rhode Island School of Design, where she teaches theory, technological criticism, artistic research, and writing across Graphic Design, Digital + Media, and Industrial Design. Her two books are *Seeing, Naming, Knowing* (The Brooklyn Rail, 2019) and *Fear Indexing the X-Files* with Steven Warwick, (Primary Information, 2017). She publishes widely, in places like Art in America, Flash Art, Mousse, 4Columns and Rhizome, where she is a long-time editor. Her practice has been supported by a Fogo Island Arts Residency, the Visual Arts Foundation/Crossed Purposes Foundation Critical Writing Grant (2018), an Eyebeam Research Residency (2017), and a Thoma Foundation 2016 Arts Writing Award in Digital Art. This year, as The Shed's first guest curator, she organized the exhibition Manual Override, focused on contemporary artists engaging and critiquing emerging technology, including Sondra Perry, Martine Syms, and Simon Fujiwara.
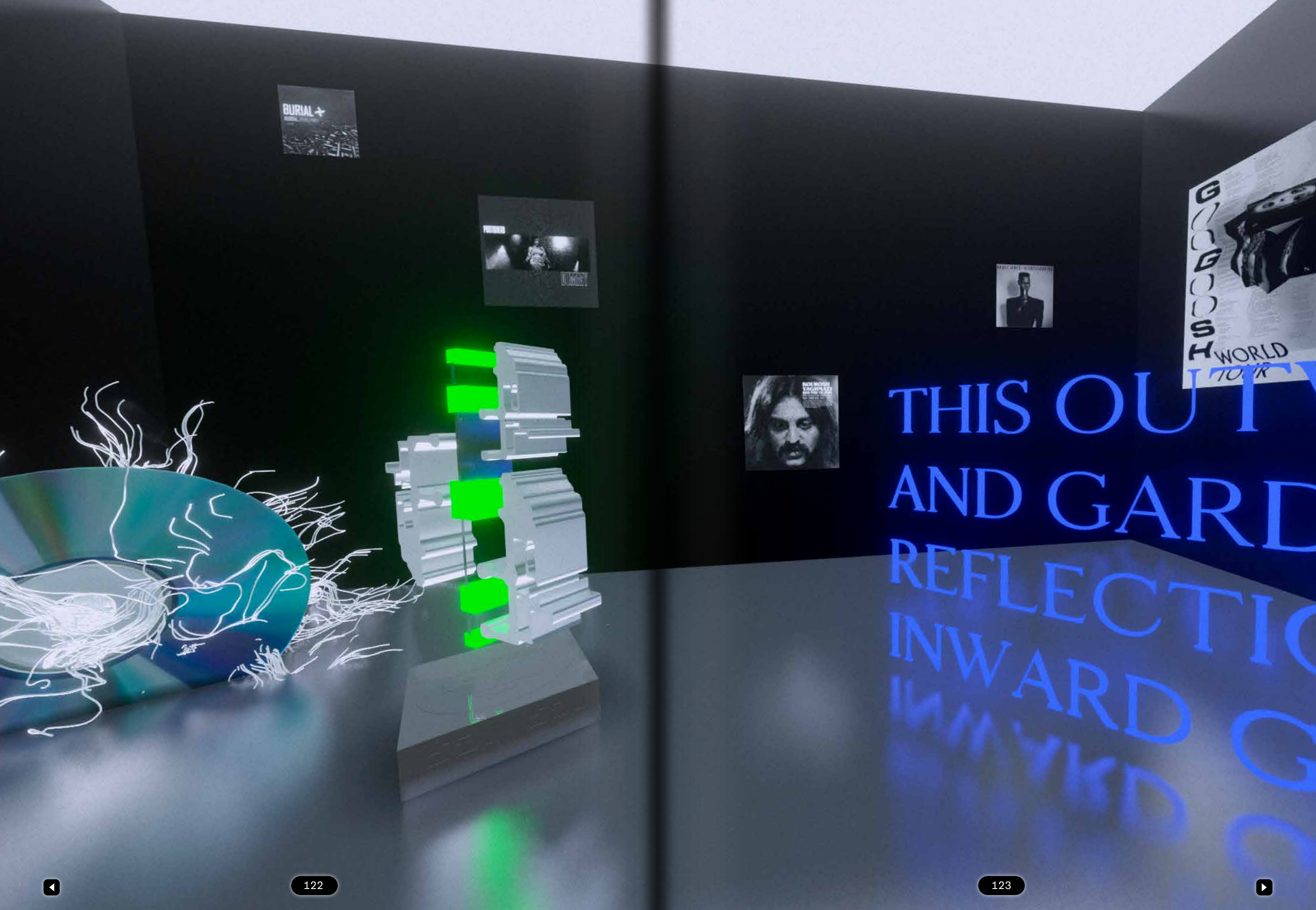
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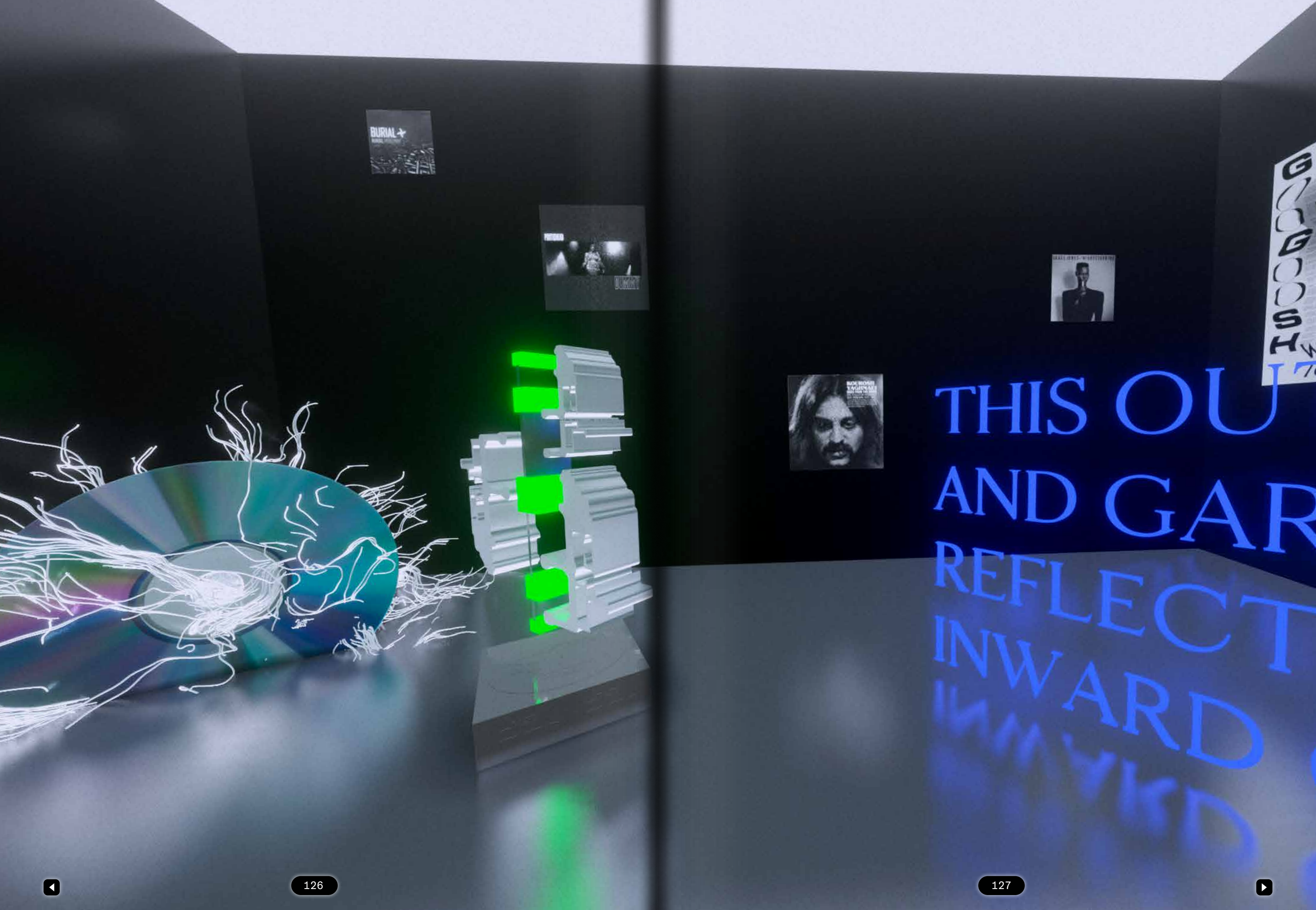
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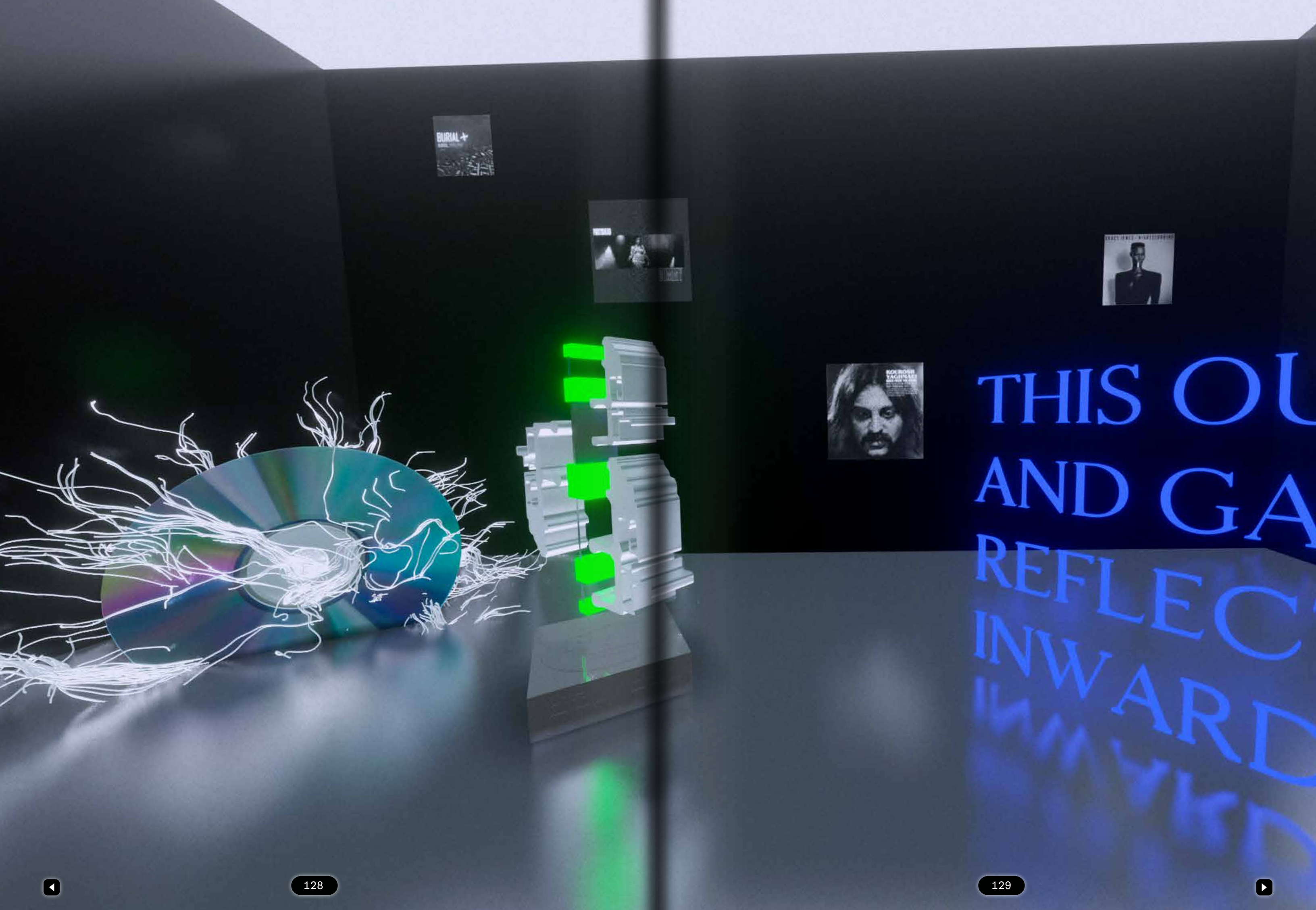
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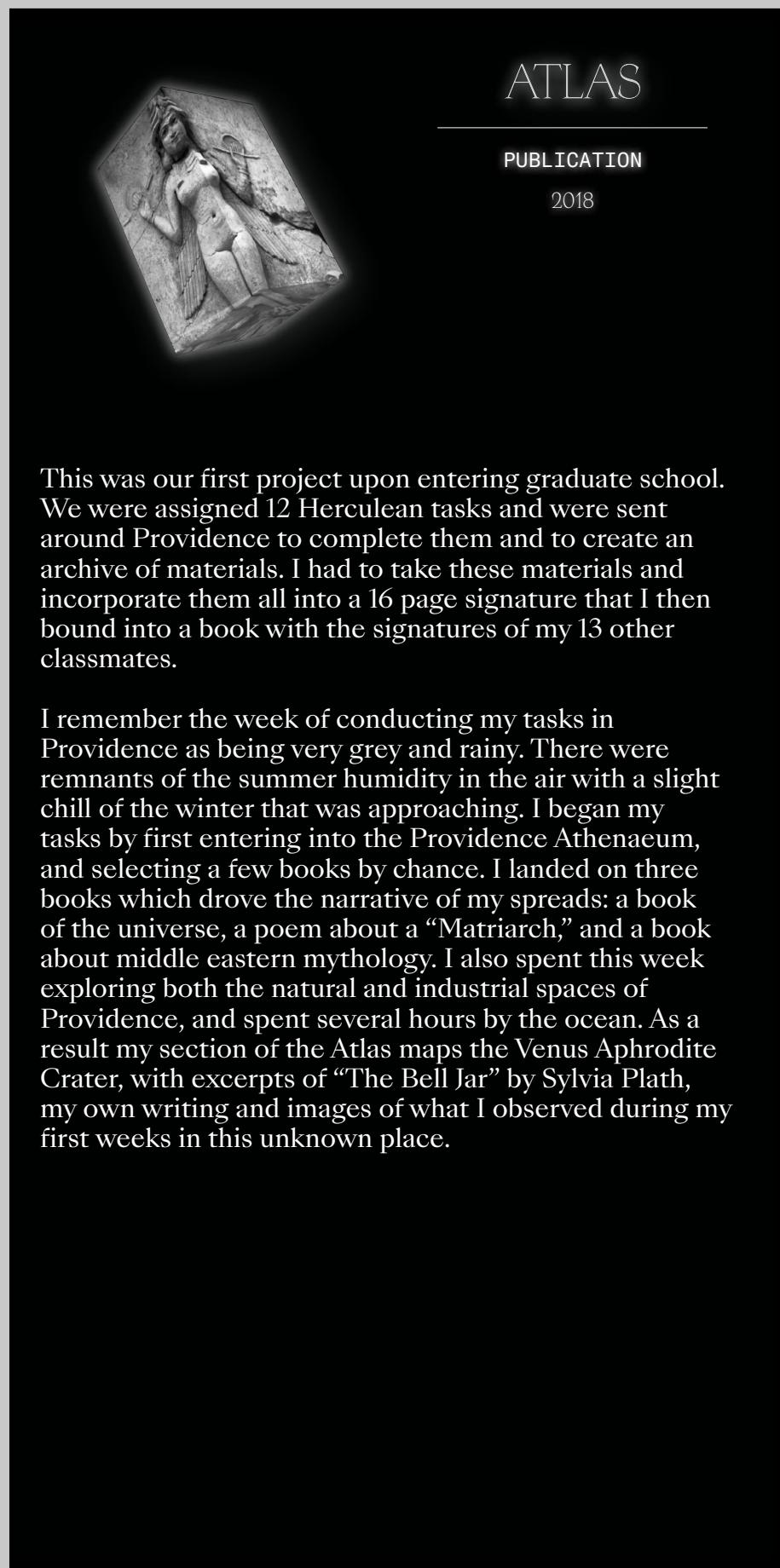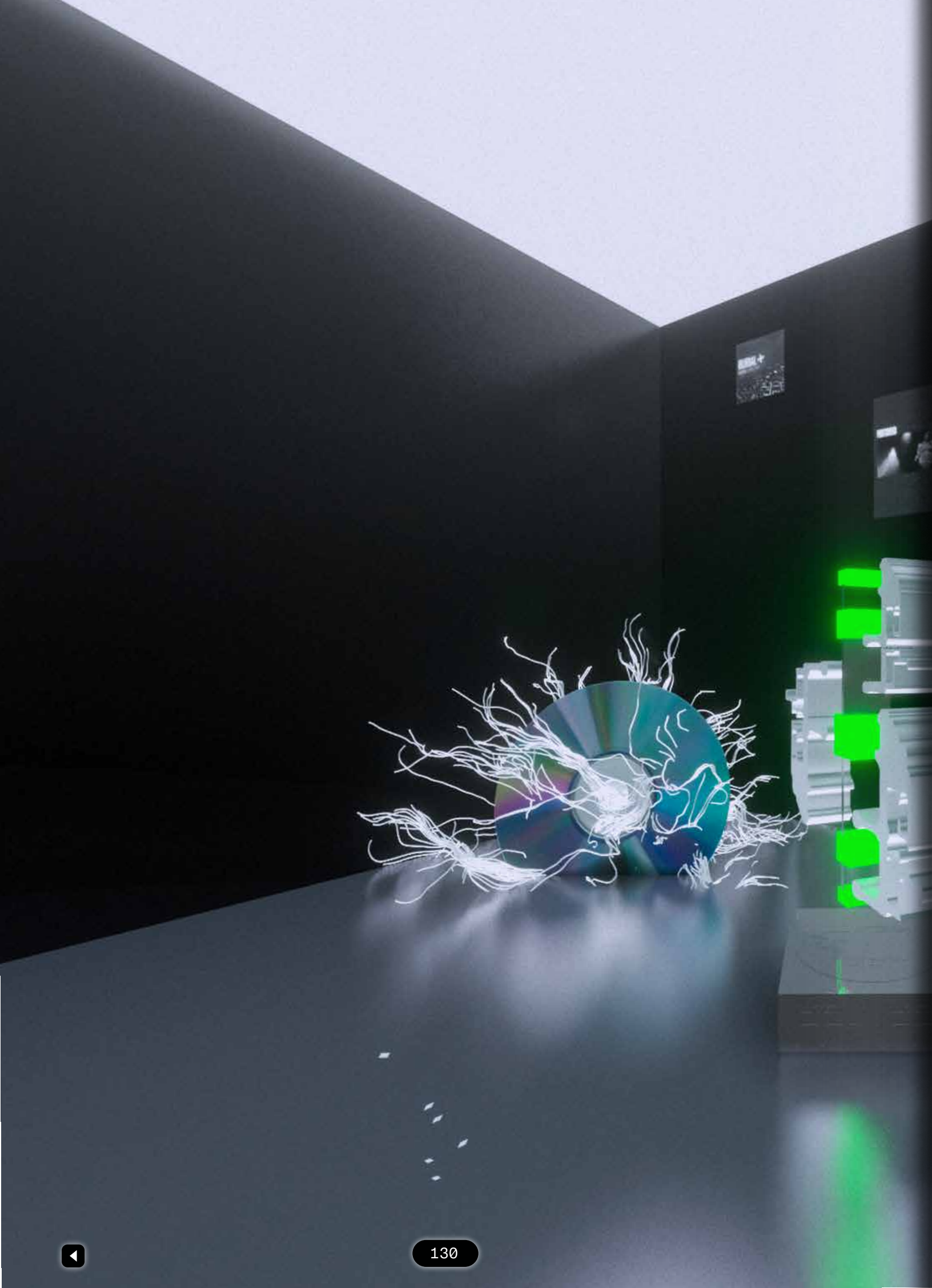
ATLAS

PUBLICATION

2018

This was our first project upon entering graduate school. We were assigned 12 Herculean tasks and were sent around Providence to complete them and to create an archive of materials. I had to take these materials and incorporate them all into a 16 page signature that I then bound into a book with the signatures of my 13 other classmates.

I remember the week of conducting my tasks in Providence as being very grey and rainy. There were remnants of the summer humidity in the air with a slight chill of the winter that was approaching. I began my tasks by first entering into the Providence Athenaeum, and selecting a few books by chance. I landed on three books which drove the narrative of my spreads: a book of the universe, a poem about a "Matriarch," and a book about middle eastern mythology. I also spent this week exploring both the natural and industrial spaces of Providence, and spent several hours by the ocean. As a result my section of the Atlas maps the Venus Aphrodite Crater, with excerpts of "The Bell Jar" by Sylvia Plath, my own writing and images of what I observed during my first weeks in this unknown place.

On this crumbling terrace
Tea is timed
Grandmother in graying silk pours
Opinion as well as oolong
For her brood, the text of the hour
As usual the pitfalls of "progress"

The spoons are only coin silver
Old and unaccountably bent,
But it's the way of using them
That matters
And the ritualized hour

One cup is cracked, the others crazed,
But nothing past is discarded

The family listens to her words
As familiar as the cameo brooch
And slowly sip, wishing for sugar
But not daring

Any afternoon in this her court
Grandmother presides
Balancing weak tea
With strong power and iron will

The world remains

Outside [1]

Venus

She is known as the Daughter of Heaven and Sea.
Venus represents the feminine aspect in all of us.
She is the creational Earth Mother. She is said to be
either a daughter of Zeus or to have sprung from
the foam of the sea. She is the brightest object in
our sky except for the Sun and the Moon. The upper
clouds of poisonous sulfuric acid swirl in a pattern
of mists on Venus, moving at speeds almost three
times faster than winds in a hurricane.

Strange that the self's continuum should outlast Aphrodite, and the Mourning Mother and I who have been Aphrodite, the mourning Isis and the queen of corn wait for the last mummer, dread Persephone to dance my dust at last into the tomb. [2]

I AM
I AM
I AM

I am, I am, I am.

Flesh, bones, matter
Just a body that carries me

I am, I am, I am

A body in space
The sky black like charcoal
The streets as empty as winter.
The air as still as water
Do you see me?

I am, I am, I am

Here.

The Goddess Isis

ON SCIENCE-FICTION

Emily Guez & Sophie Loloi

EG: Do you have a first sci-fi movie that you watched that was impactful for you?

SL: *Inception*. I was drawn to how it deals with the mind, memories, dreams and the unreal.

EG: Did like did you like anything specific about it?

SL: The visuals and how it plays with architecture. I love the relationship of architecture and film — you mentioned Blade Runner and architecture is a profound part of this film as well. The World building and the other deeper layers to the film dealing with dreams and asking what is real and unreal.

EG: For me it was *The Matrix*. I started taking Taekwondo classes because of the main female character Trinity. She's a powerful character and I think I really responded to that.

I recently read a Sci-Fi book by Octavia Butler, do you know her? It's the Genesis series and it is about aliens that interact with humans. It made me think about how on earth there is already Science Fiction with what's already here. At least if you saw it through eyes of someone who had never seen it. I think that sci-fi plays a role in our brains and our capacity to imagine things.

IAM

IAM

IAM

Earth, isn't this what you want?
To arise in us, invisible? Is it not your dream,
to enter us so wholly there's nothing left
outside us to see? [3]

Light
Space
Sound
Water
Ripples
Earth
Grass
Green
Sky
Clouds
Air
Breath
Eyes
Skin
Matter
Decay
Visible
Tangible
Untangible
Flesh
Bone
Concrete
Dreams
Failure
Sadness
Happiness
Excitment
Boredom
Memories
Reality

SL: I think a lot of sci-fi is set in "the future" but it's really just a reflection of current times.

EG: I'm really curious about *Annihilation*, but I haven't seen it.

SL: I think the main reason why I would recommend it is not only because it is a great sci-fi, but it's a sci-fi film that stars four women. That was really impactful for me. I didn't realize until watching this film how hard I had to work to put myself into the point of view of the female characters. Even in the Matrix the chosen one is a man —the Savior. So that was a major thing with Annihilation.

EG: That's really interesting. I think that as a kid I would identify with the male characters. I've read research that women have a much higher capacity to identify with the character no matter the gender is, but men only identify with male characters, but it's because there's no other option. For example if you're a young girl watching superhero films and all the heroes are male, you have to identify with the man because that's the point of view character. It's interesting that I don't realize how often I'm doing that work.

**Lady of elemental forces
flood-storm adorned
a whirlwind warrior
bound on a twister
fighting is her play
she never tires of it
she goes out running**

I AM

Aphrodite

Venus

Daughter

I AM

Ishtar

I AM

Mother
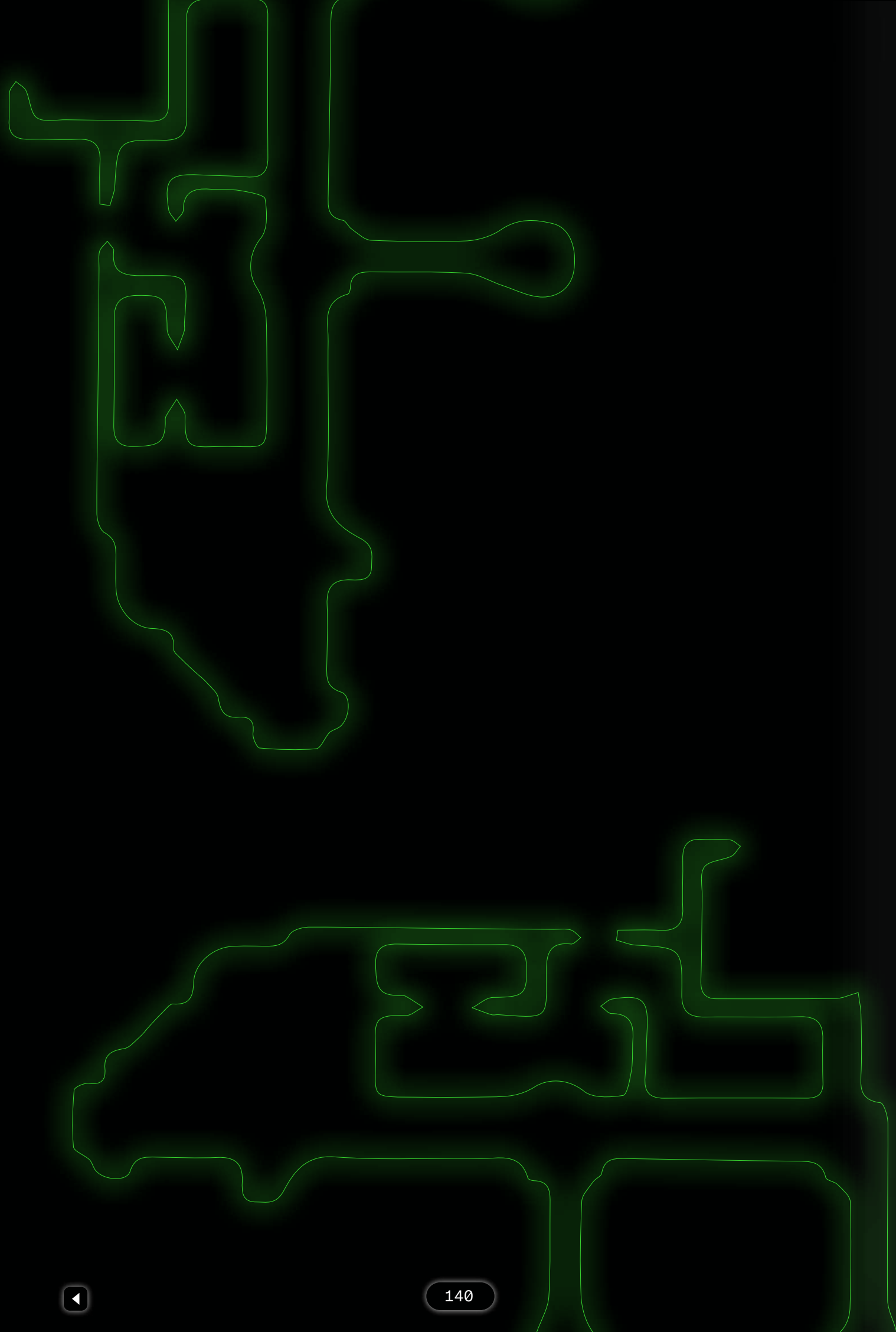
THE GARDEN

You have now entered into the garden space. Here you interact with the chrome crystalline flowers; shiny and bright with the digital blue halation glowing off them. Flourished with chrome crystal structures, they are a vector that echoes Ancient Persian Gardens. This garden becomes a digital multi sensorial experience of bathing in the presence of digital plant species. The chrome is delicate fractals; shiny and bright with promises of the future; a future that may have passed or is yet to come. The crystalline structures seem like they will shatter if you could actually touch them and their forms echo with nostalgia.

Longing and fragility in the context of a virtual world is a paradox created through pixels, zeroes and ones. However, isn't longing and imagination necessary for the creation of new worlds? What does it mean to experience sites, real or imaginary, through the digital looking glass of the virtual?
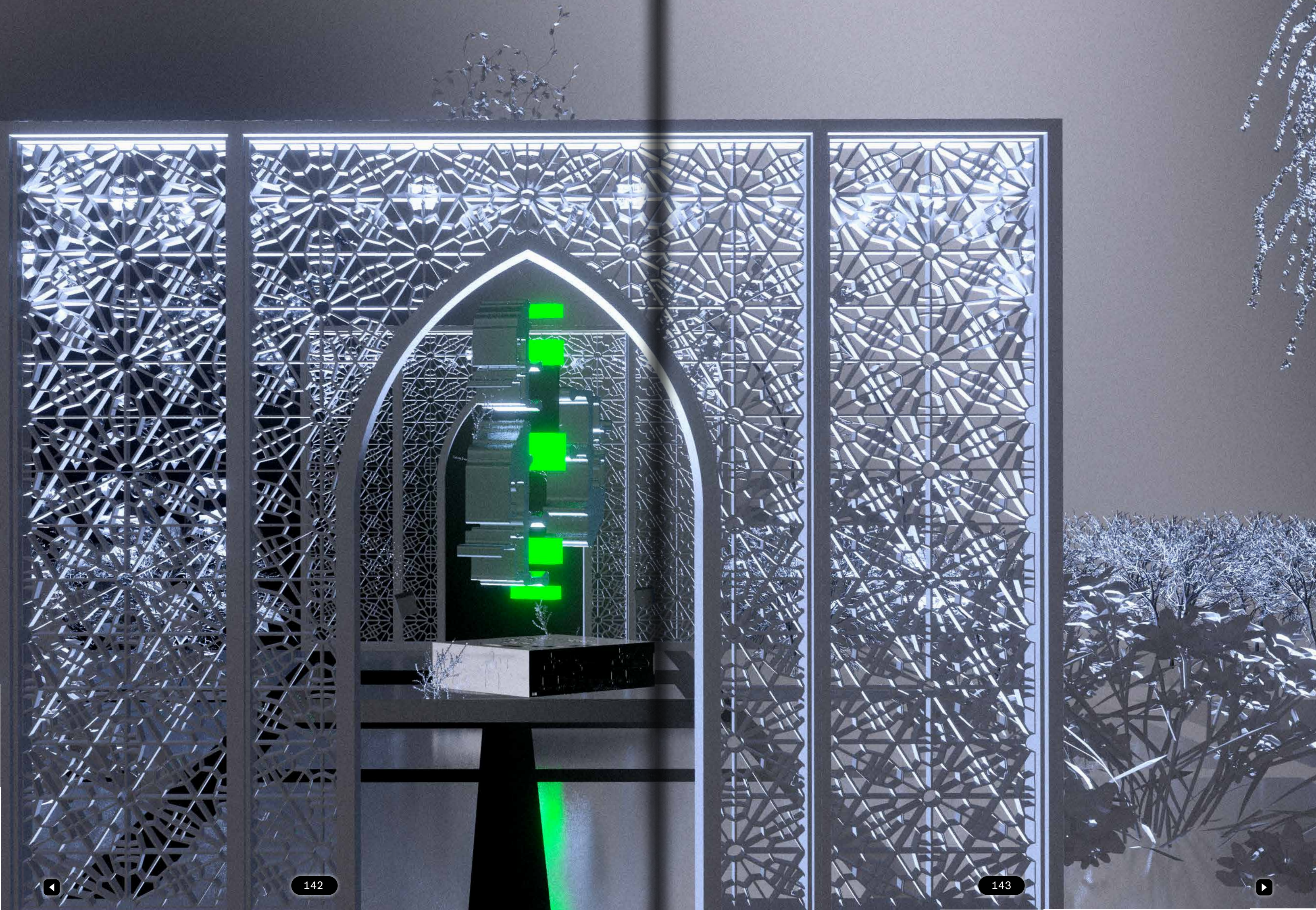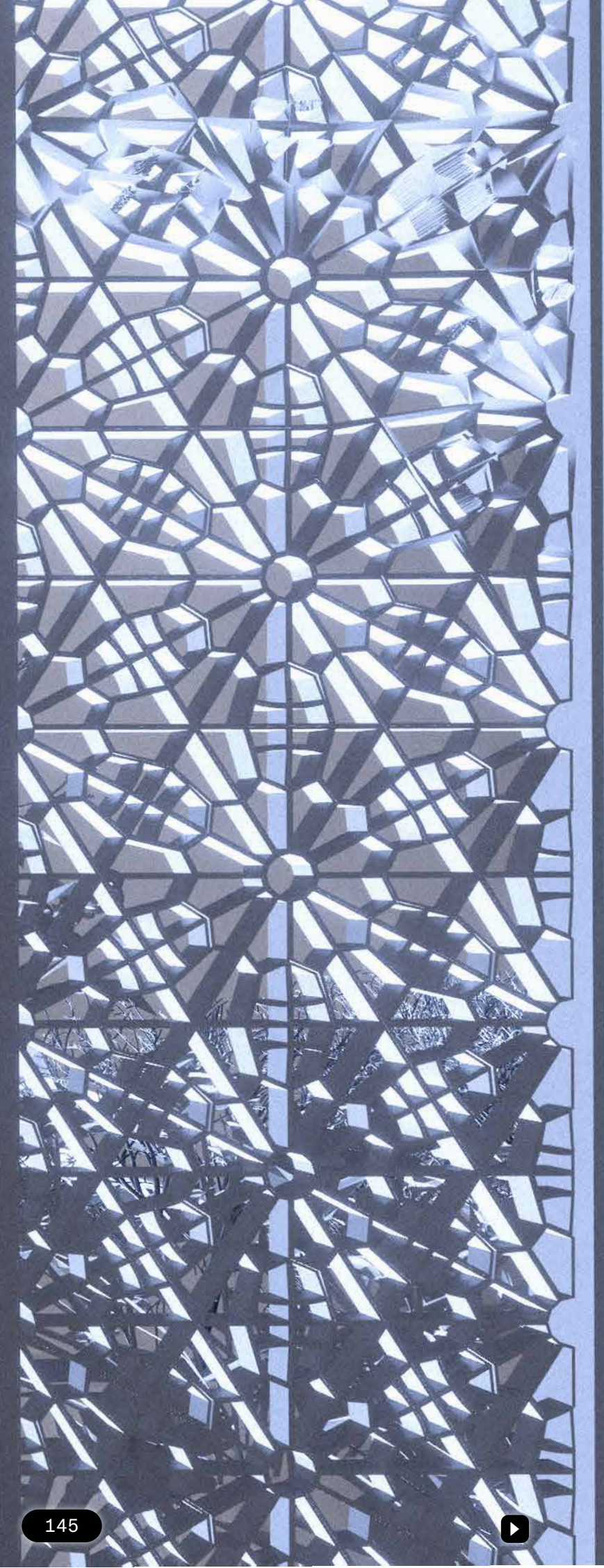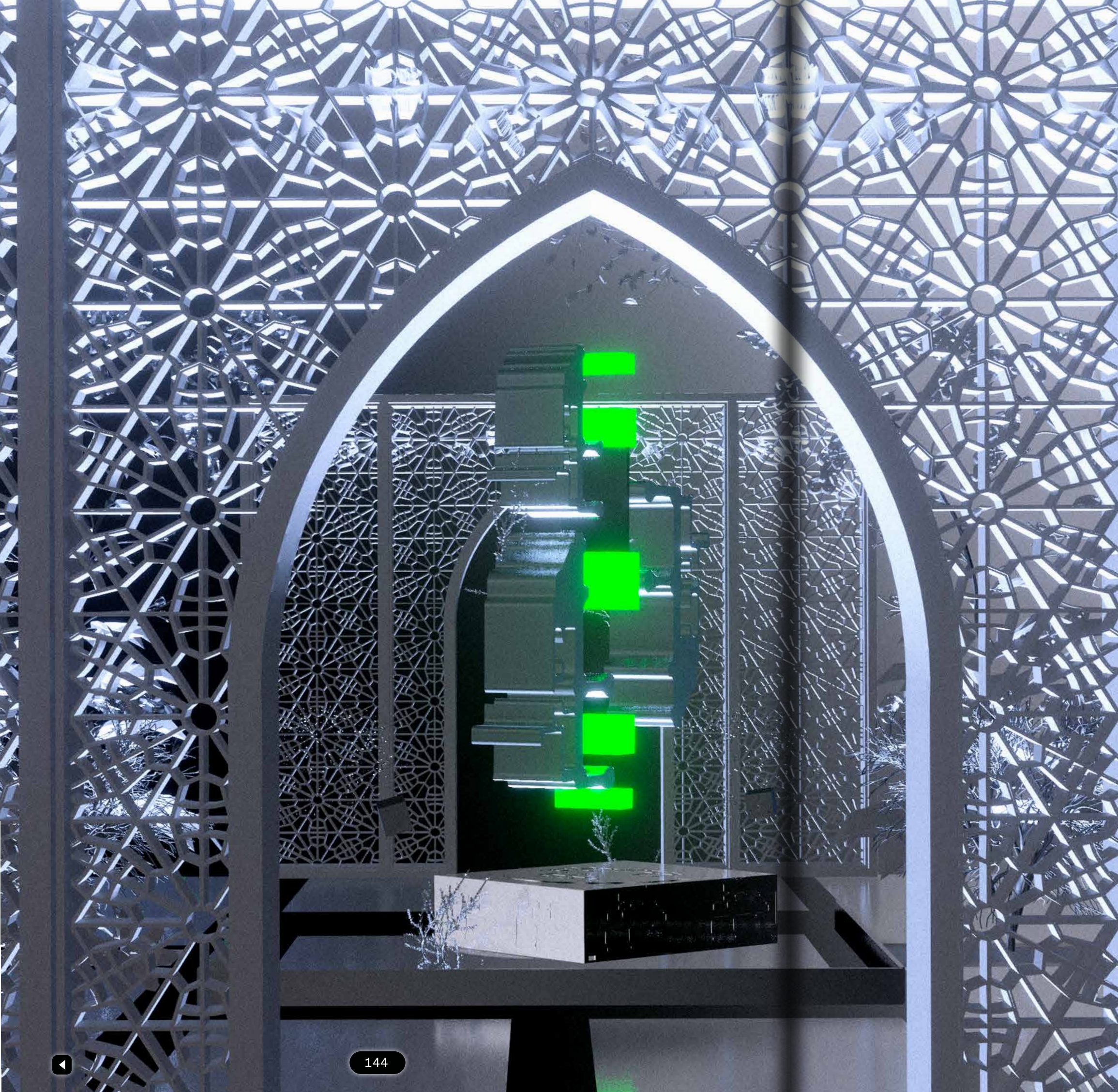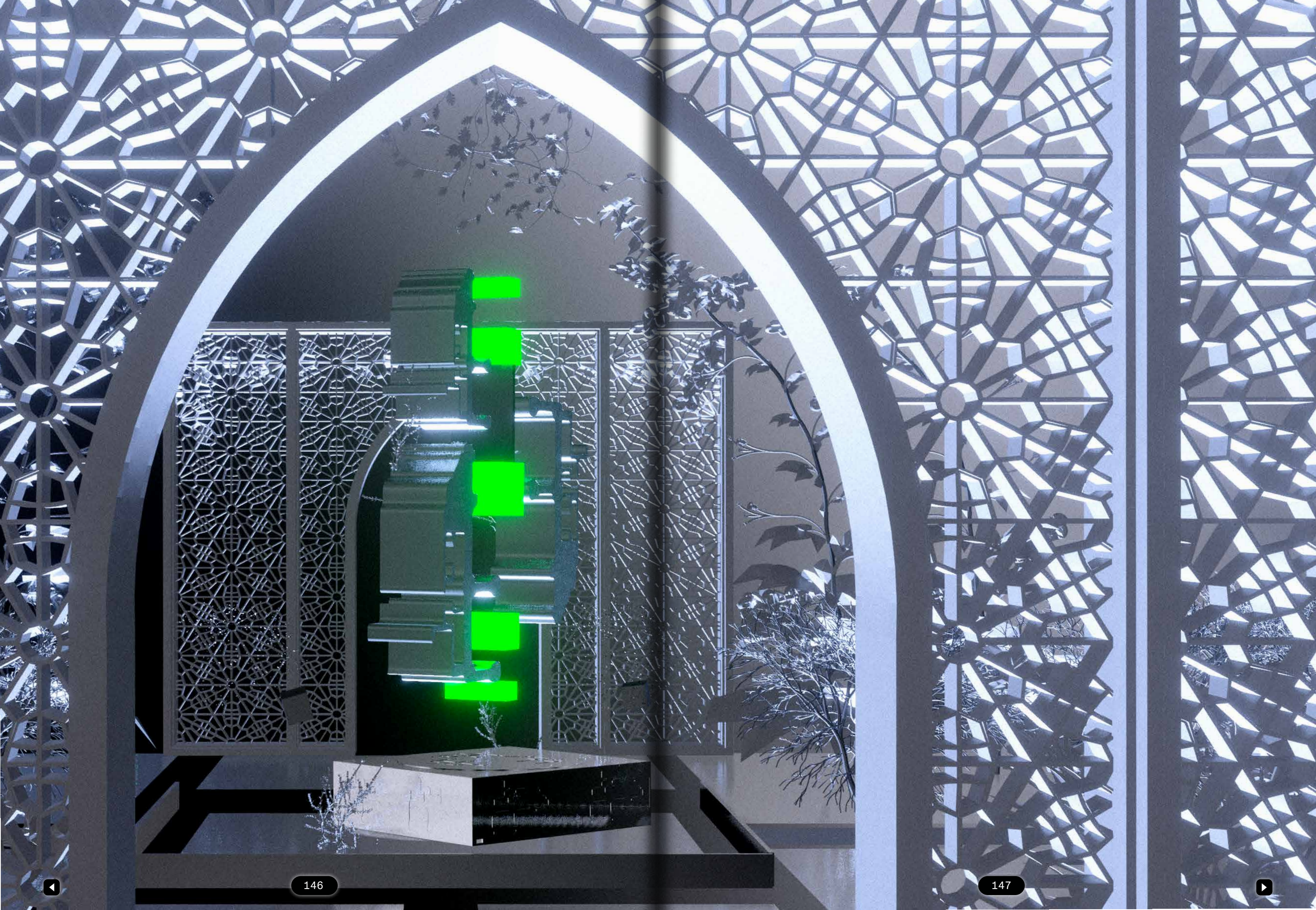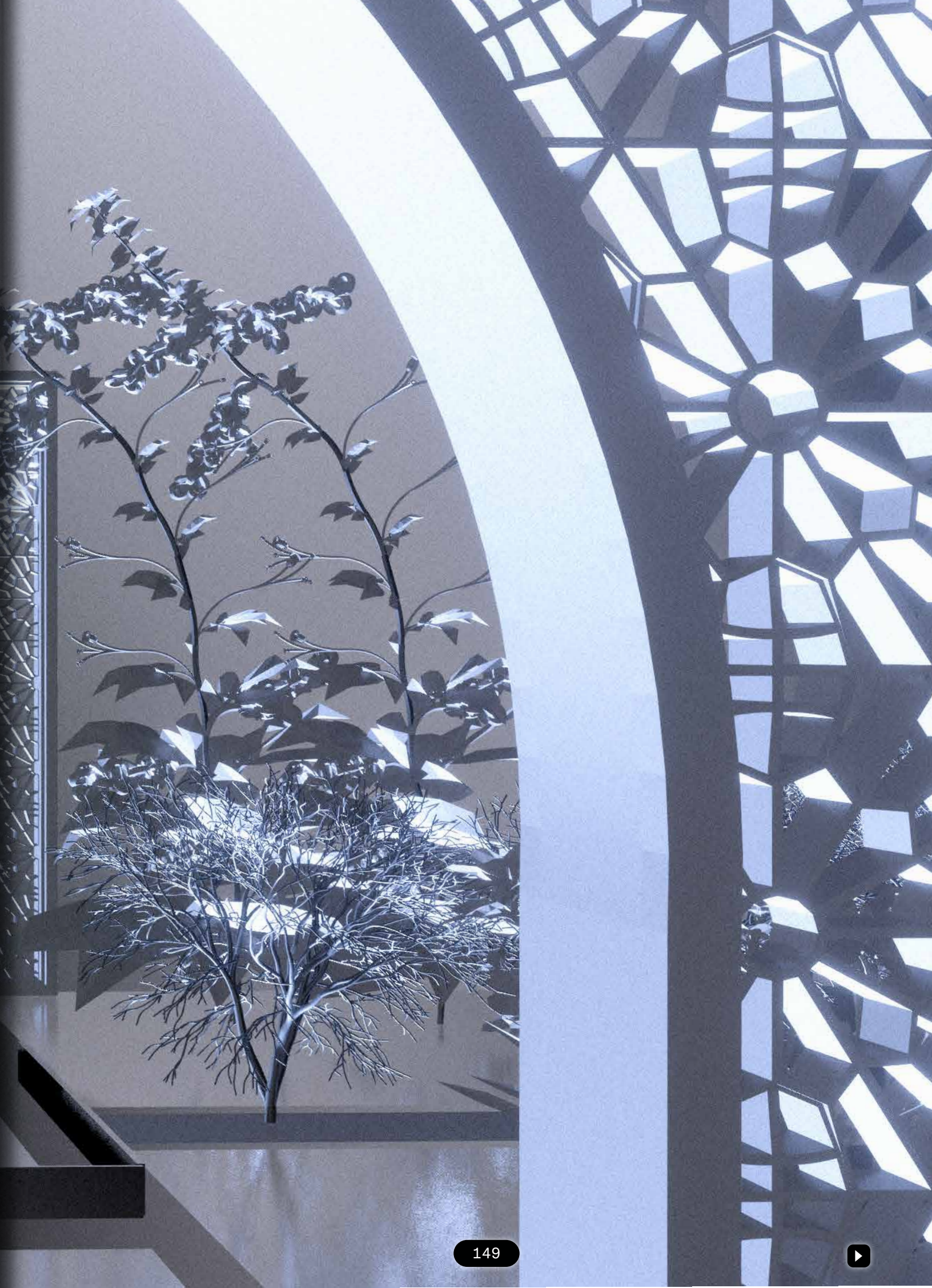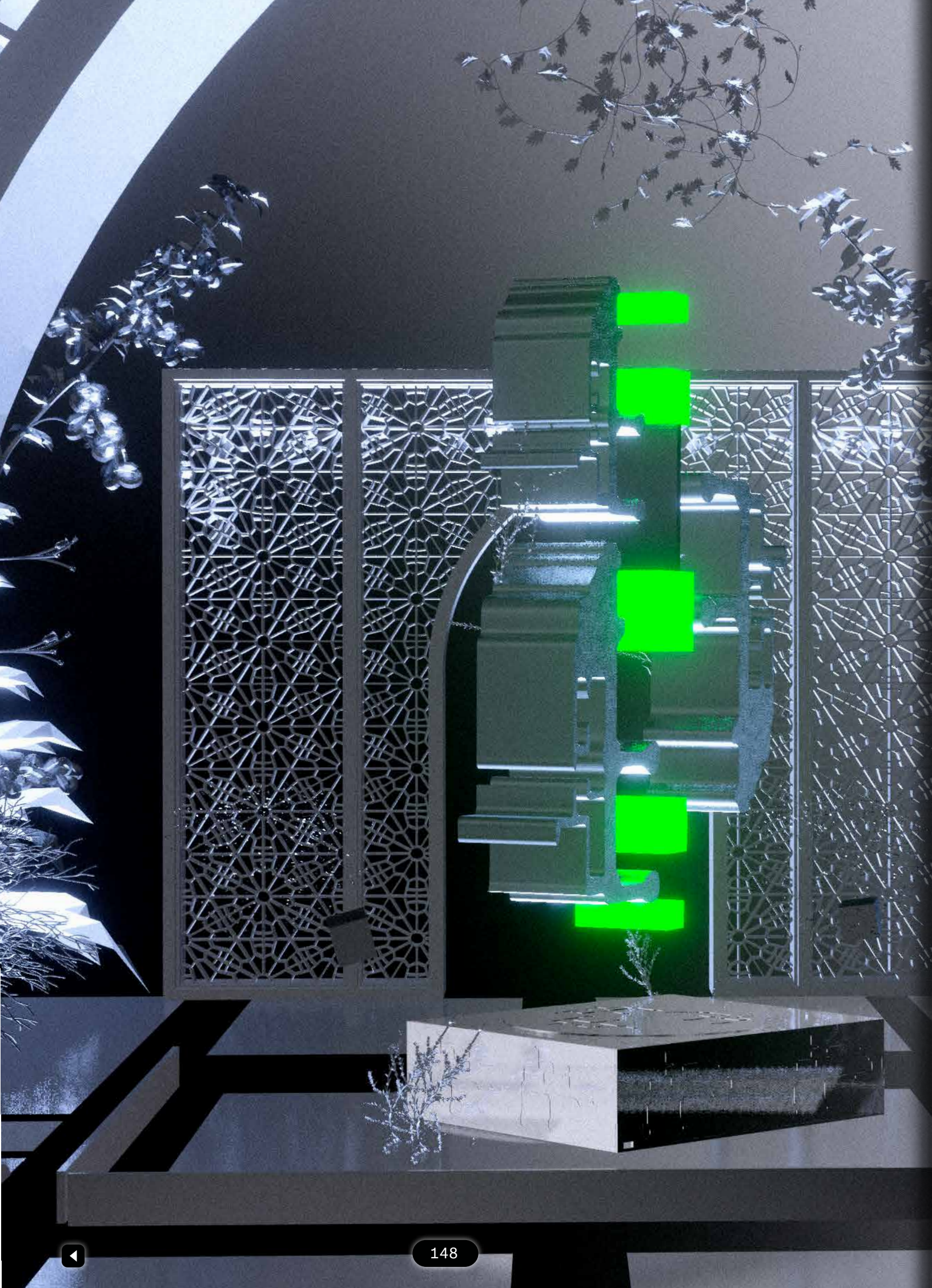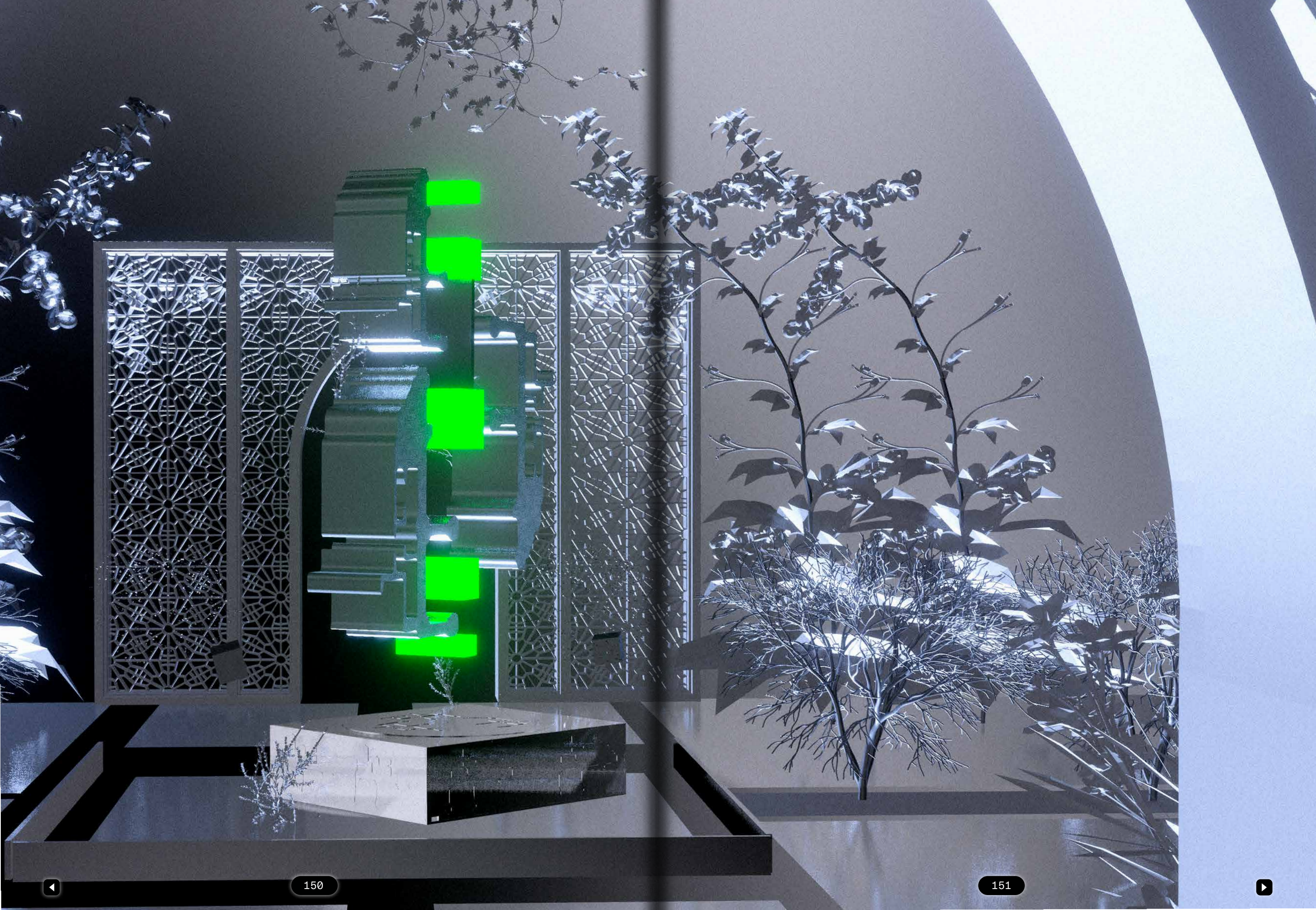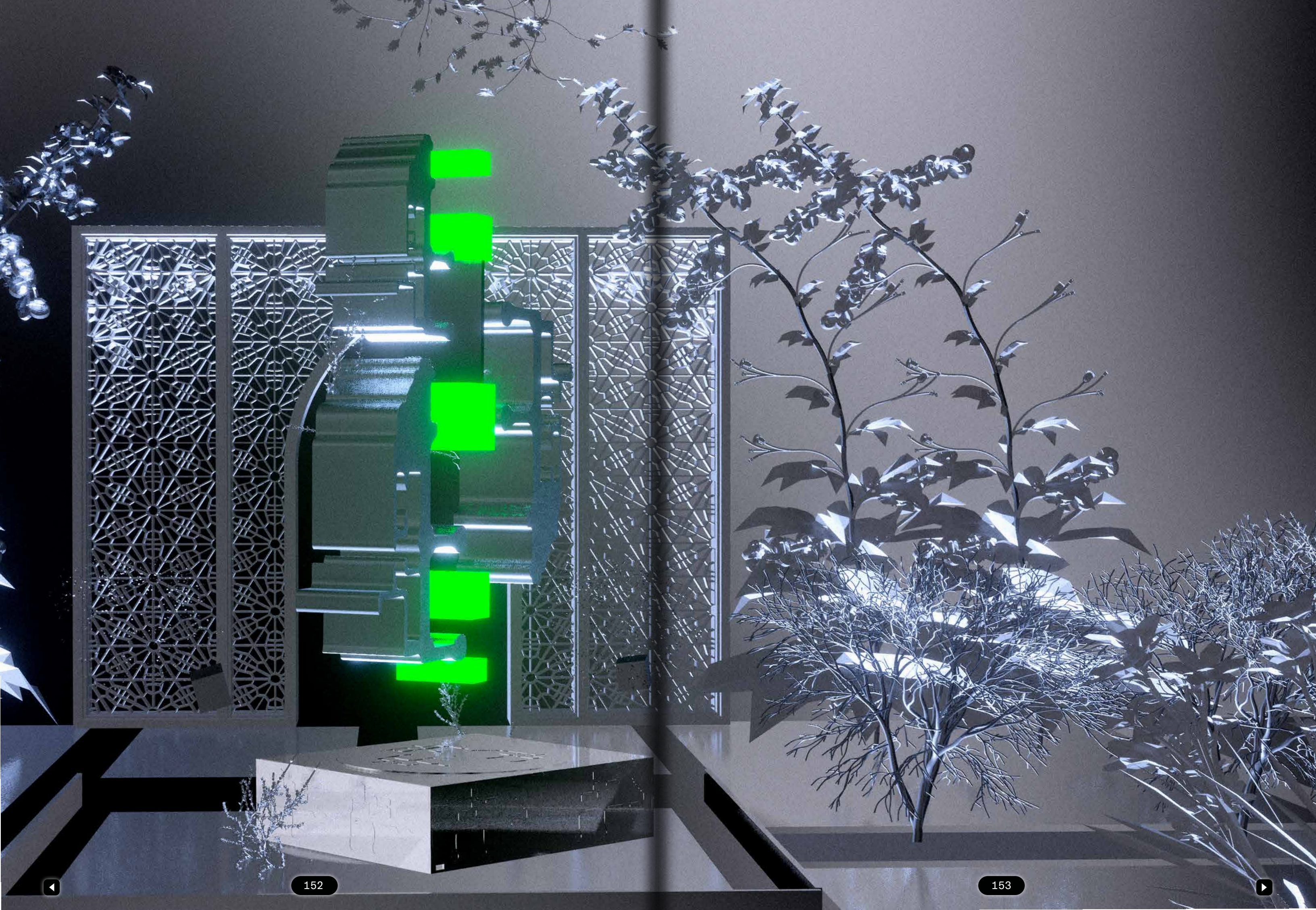
A conversation I had with my mother about leaving

What was it like the day we left?

I remember I took you to the park, it was "Laleh park" and I thought "she's not going to have this experience again.

I remember thinking "is it right? because this is your land, and I am going to be taking you somewhere you don't understand their language.

I remember when you were eleven and we returned back to Iran for the first time since leaving and you said "when I hear farsi it feels like there are butterflies in my stomach…delam yek joori misheh."

When you want to go somewhere as an immigrant one day you are happy with your decision and the next day you regret it, and this feeling keeps happening.

One day you say I am happy for this decision, then the next day you think "why did I do this?"

Do you still, even today feel like this is not your land?

Oh every day. You are never sure. It also depends on the age that you come here. It depends on what you leave behind. When you leave your entire family behind you are unsure forever.

Do you regret leaving?

For Iranians its hard to say because it's due to political reasons that we left.

So if it wasn't for the political situation you wouldn't have left?

Absolutely. Never.

In the past Iranians never thought for a split second that they would stay in America. We are only here because there was not livable.

What do you think your life would be like today if you never had to leave Iran?

We would have a normal life. My school, my memories, my friends. I left it all behind. For me its hard, I will never feel like I am home. I am always living temporarily. It's always "we will see."

Can you describe the day at the airport and how that felt?

Everyone was crying. I had doubts. Its a big change to change the location of your life. It means coming to the unknown with empty hands.

Why are you crying?

Would you have left if you didn't have me?

I don't think so. We left for you, for you to have a future.

When you were around my age did you ever think you would leave home?

I wanted to visit, but I didn't want to escape.
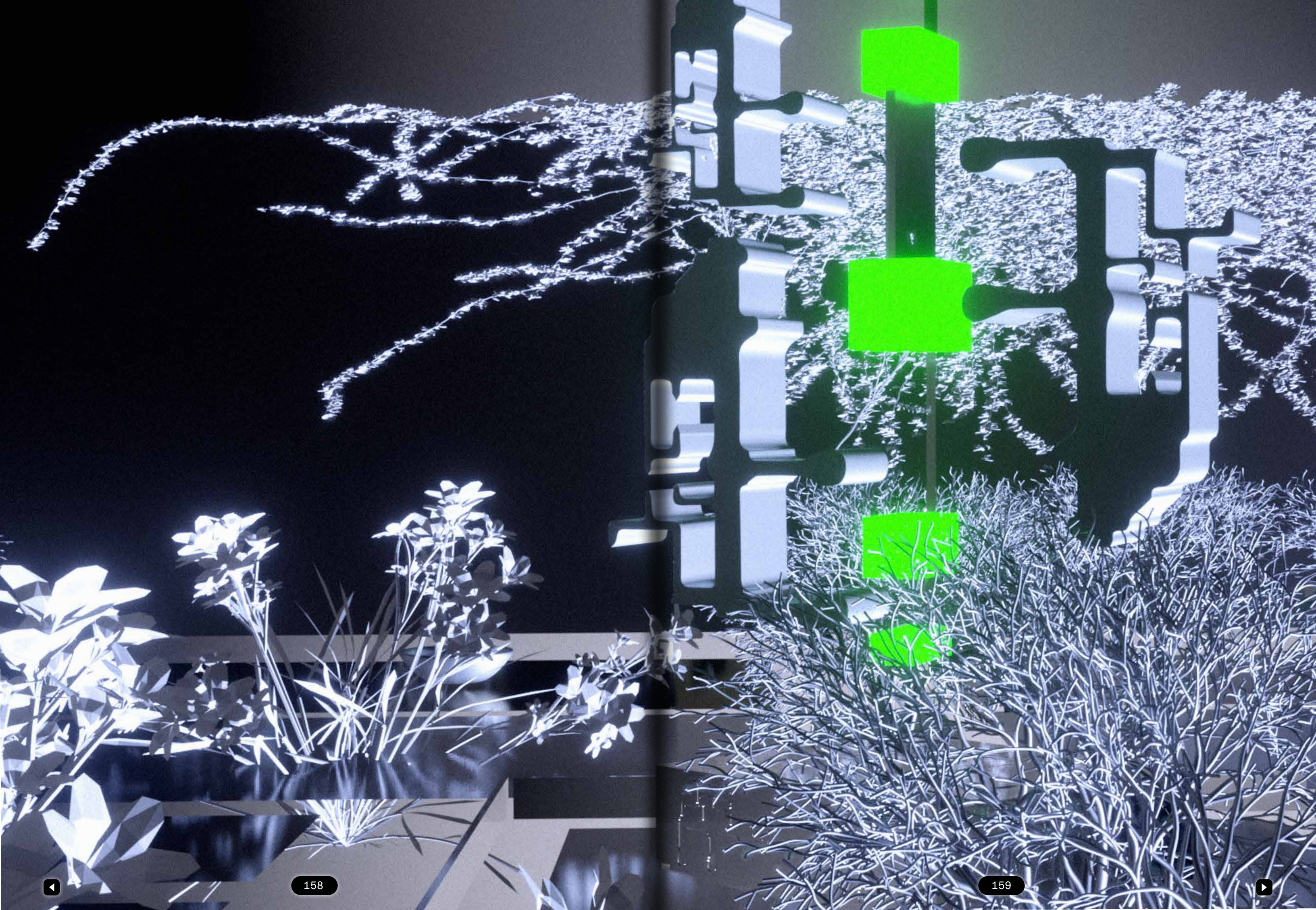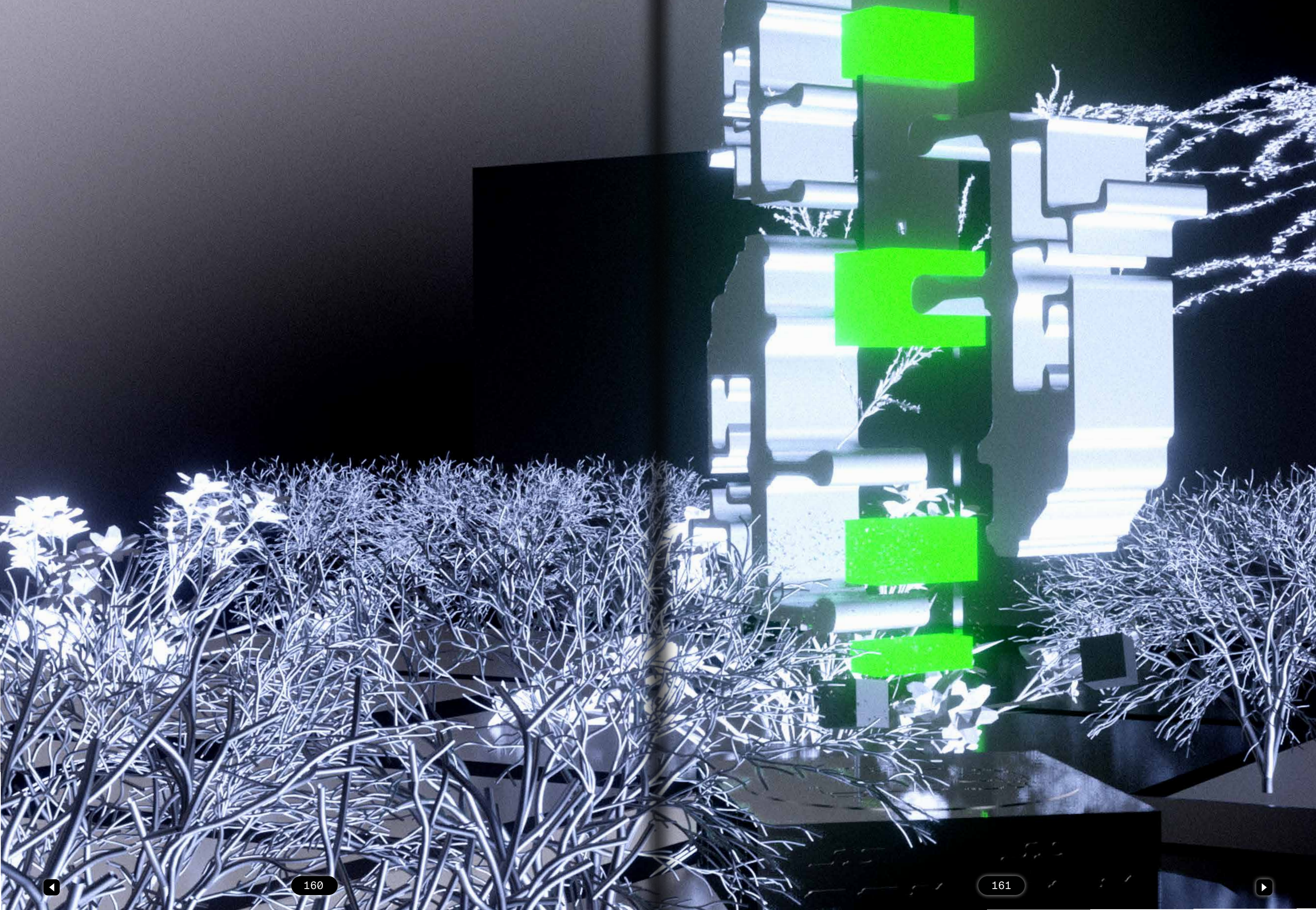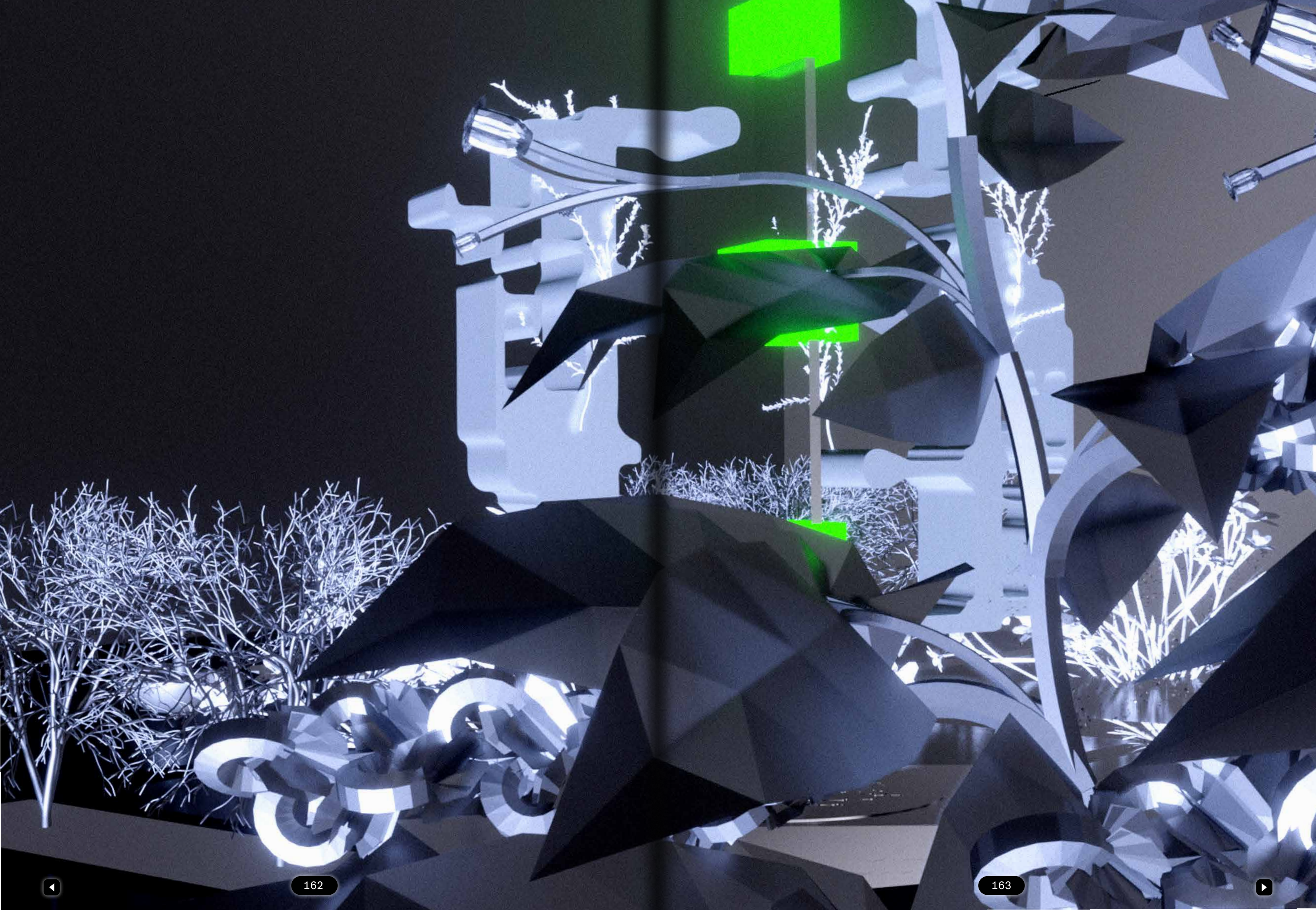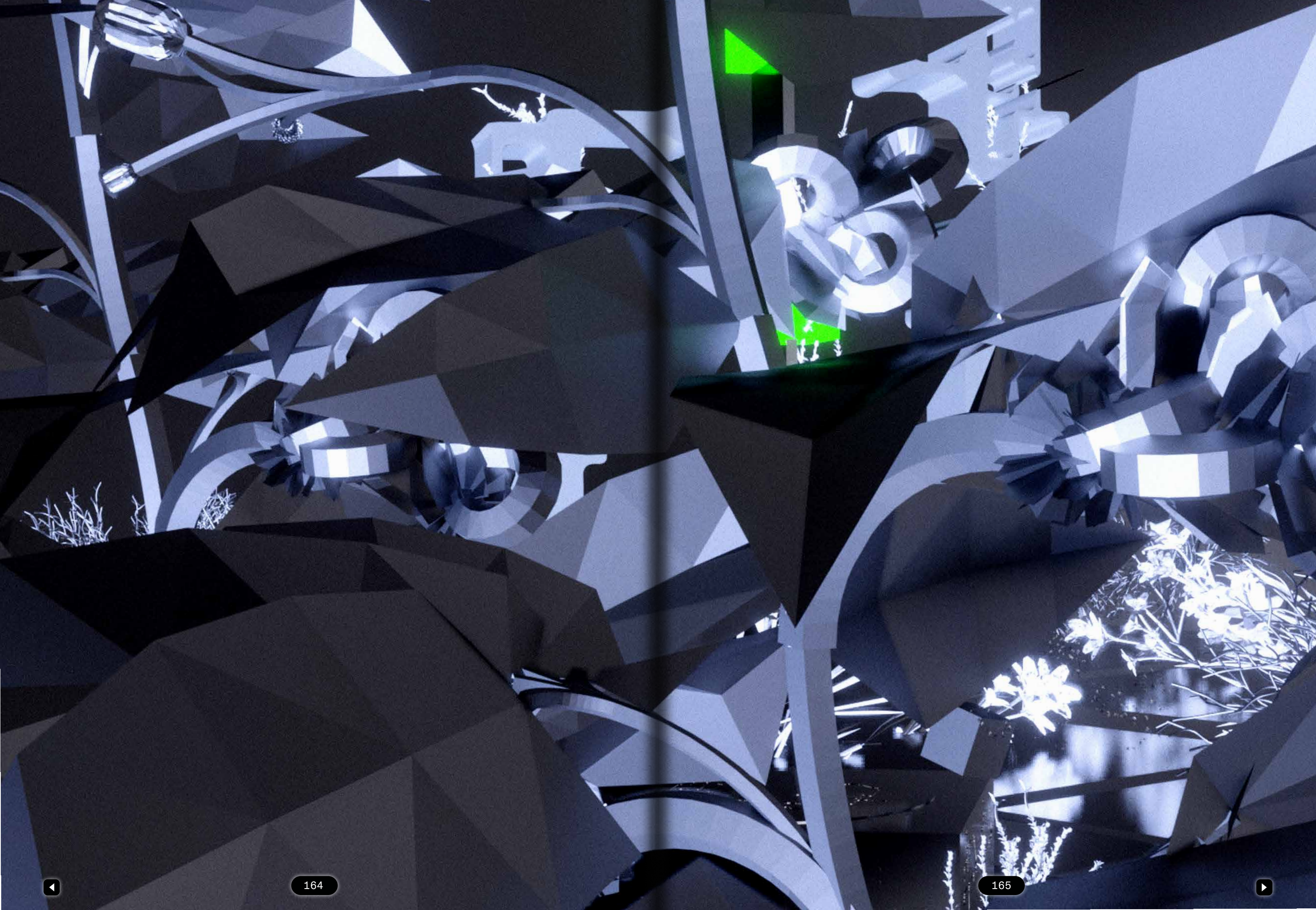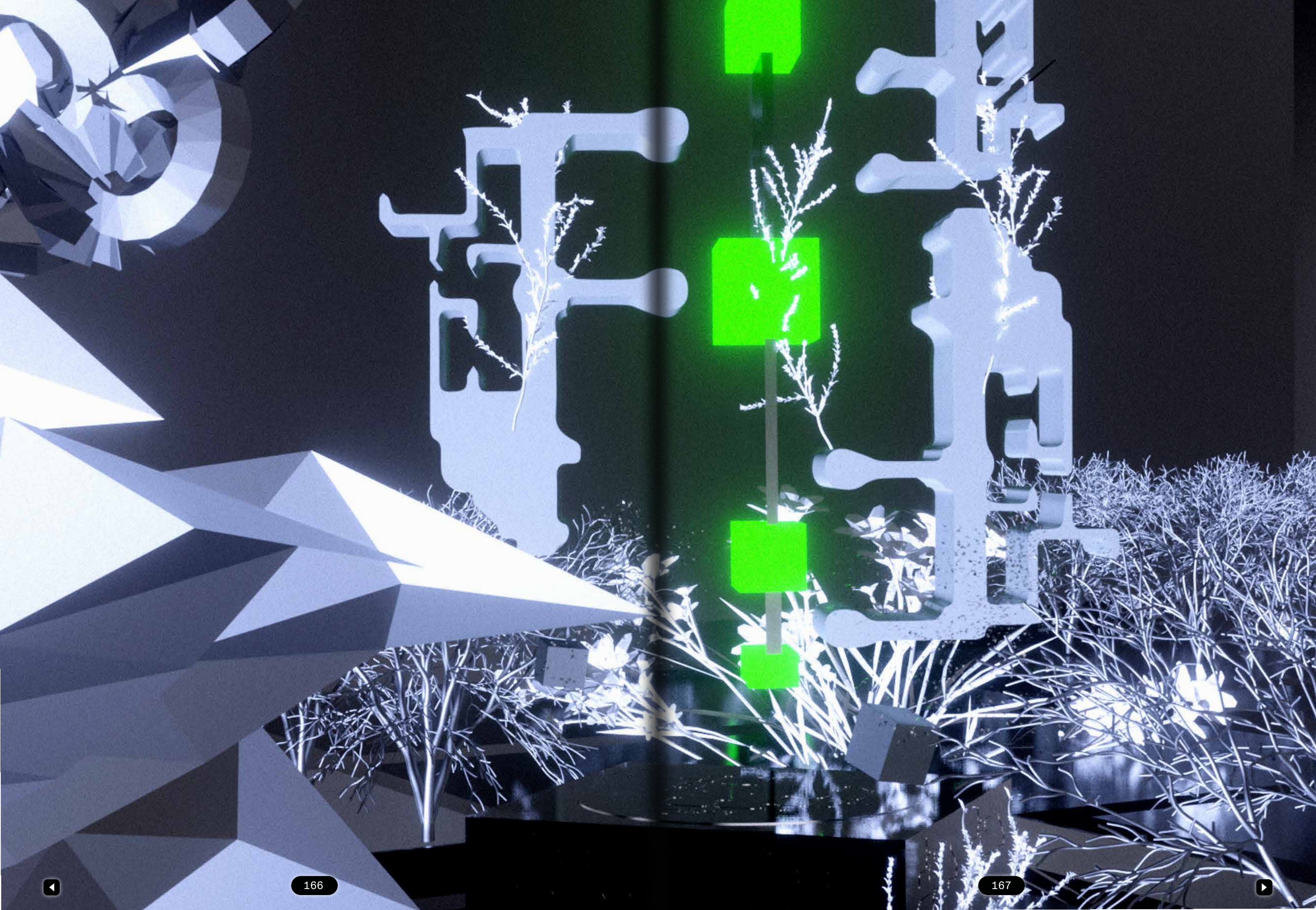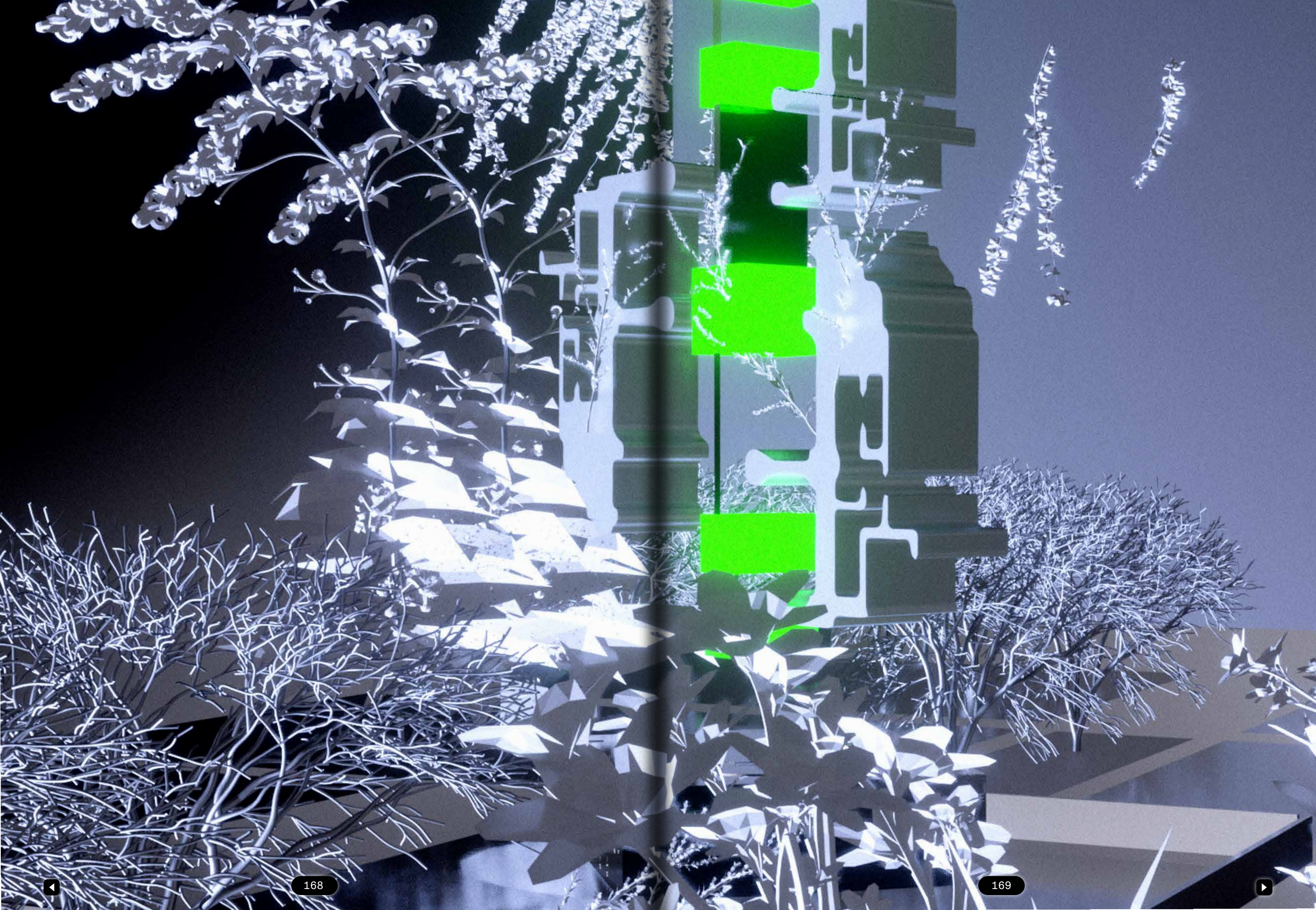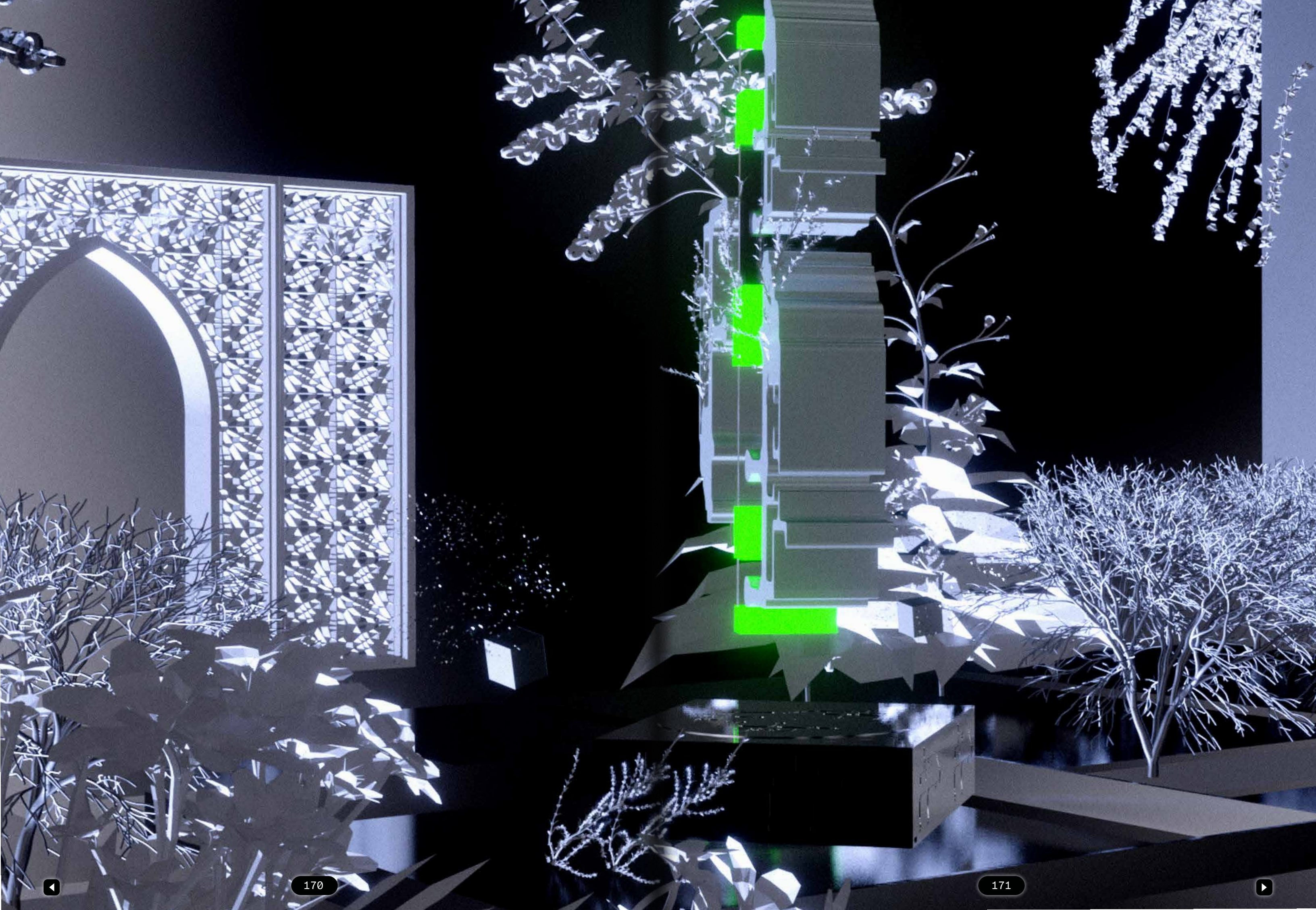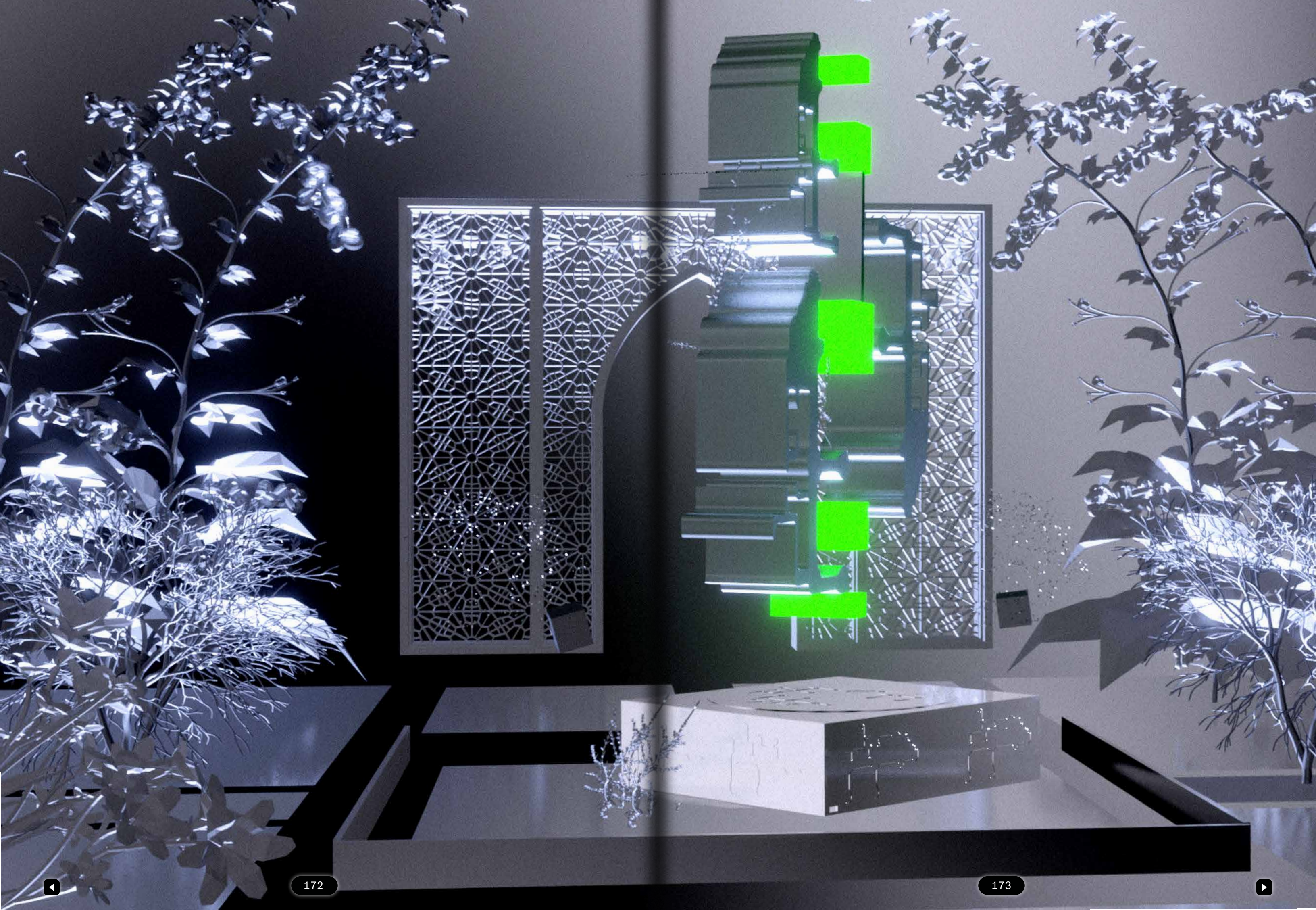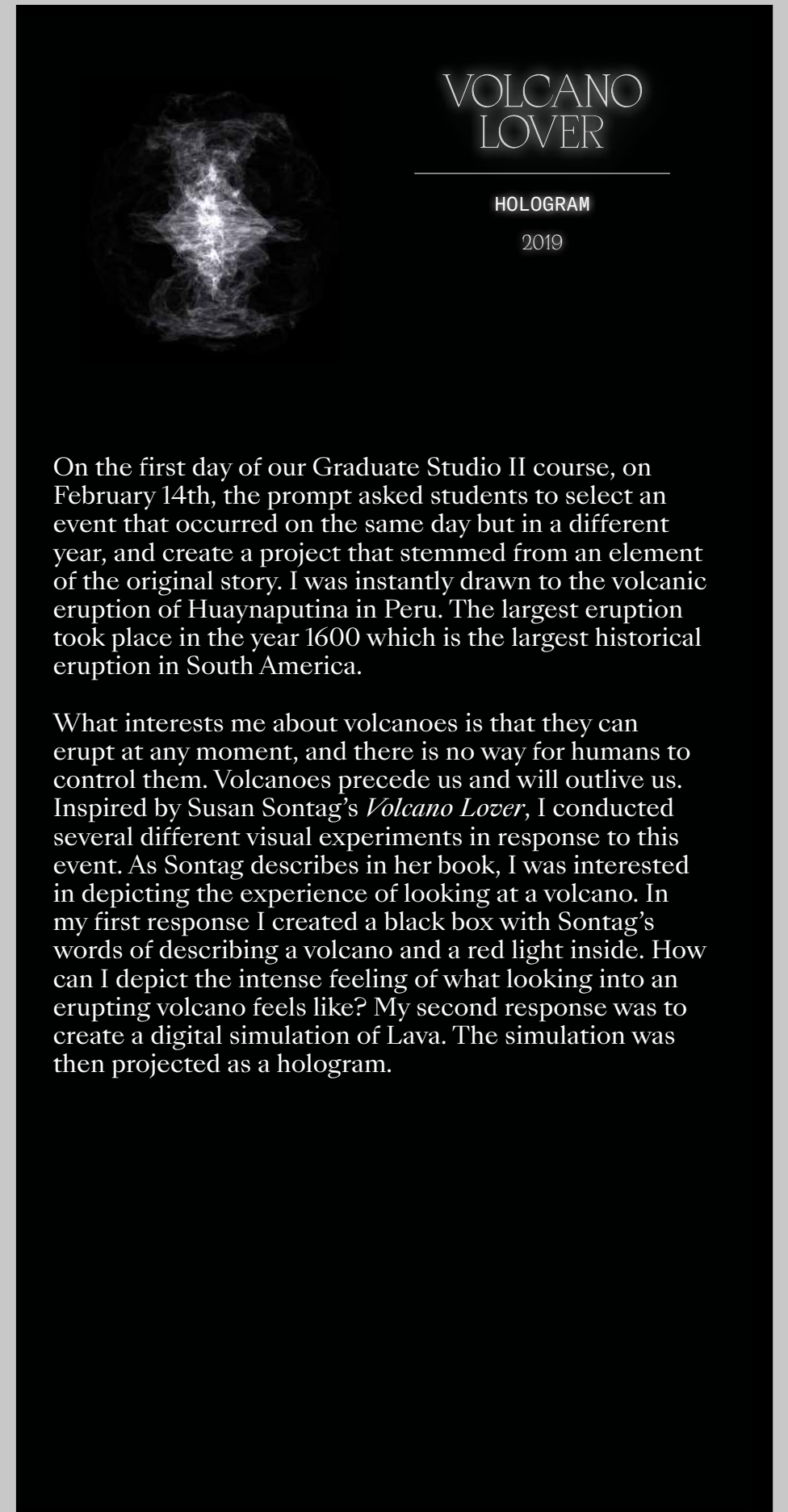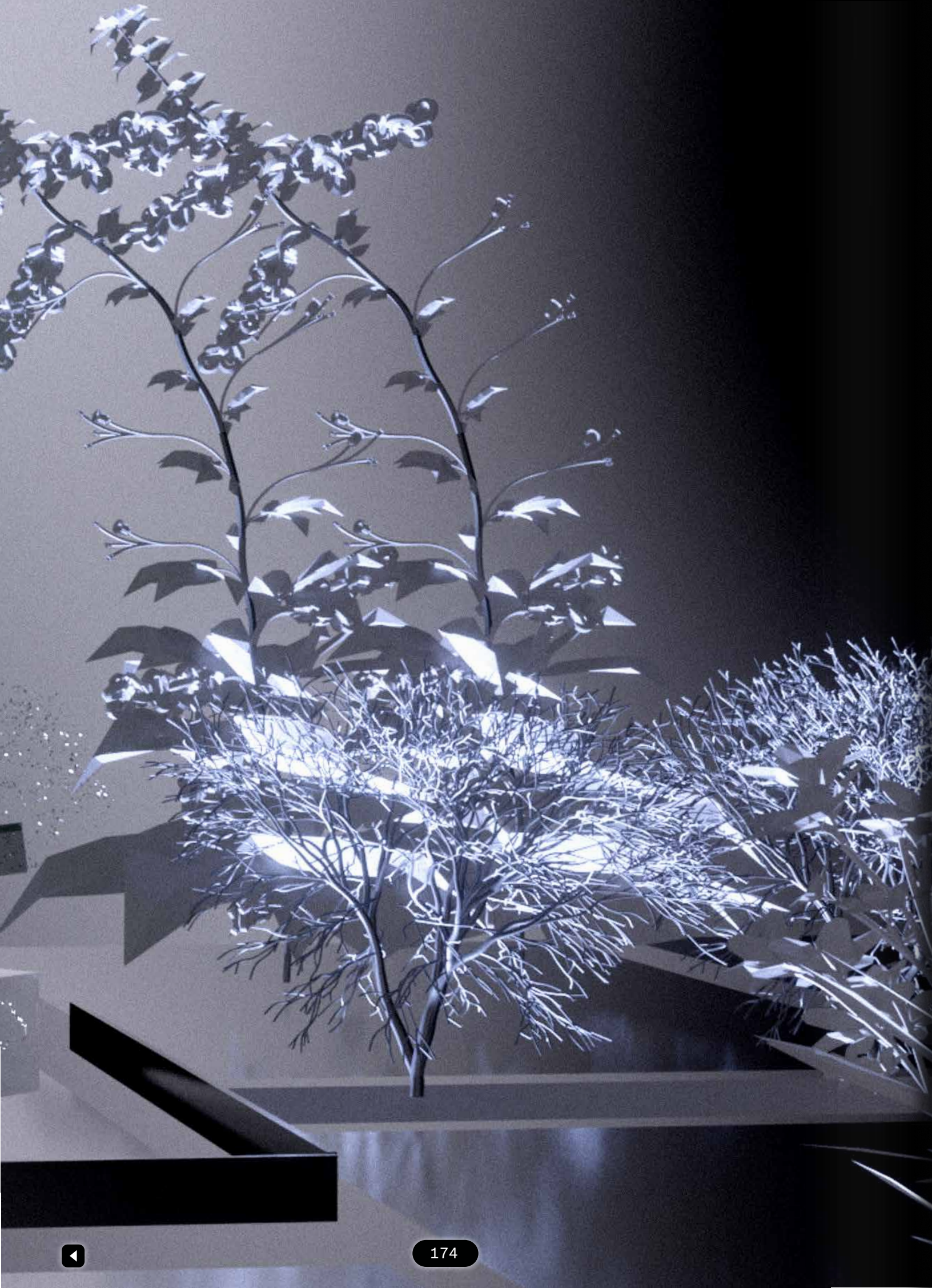
VOLCANO LOVER

HOLOGRAM

2019

On the first day of our Graduate Studio II course, on February 14th, the prompt asked students to select an event that occurred on the same day but in a different year, and create a project that stemmed from an element of the original story. I was instantly drawn to the volcanic eruption of Huaynaputina in Peru. The largest eruption took place in the year 1600 which is the largest historical eruption in South America.

What interests me about volcanoes is that they can erupt at any moment, and there is no way for humans to control them. Volcanoes precede us and will outlive us. Inspired by Susan Sontag's *Volcano Lover*, I conducted several different visual experiments in response to this event. As Sontag describes in her book, I was interested in depicting the experience of looking at a volcano. In my first response I created a black box with Sontag's words of describing a volcano and a red light inside. How can I depict the intense feeling of what looking into an erupting volcano feels like? My second response was to create a digital simulation of Lava. The simulation was then projected as a hologram.
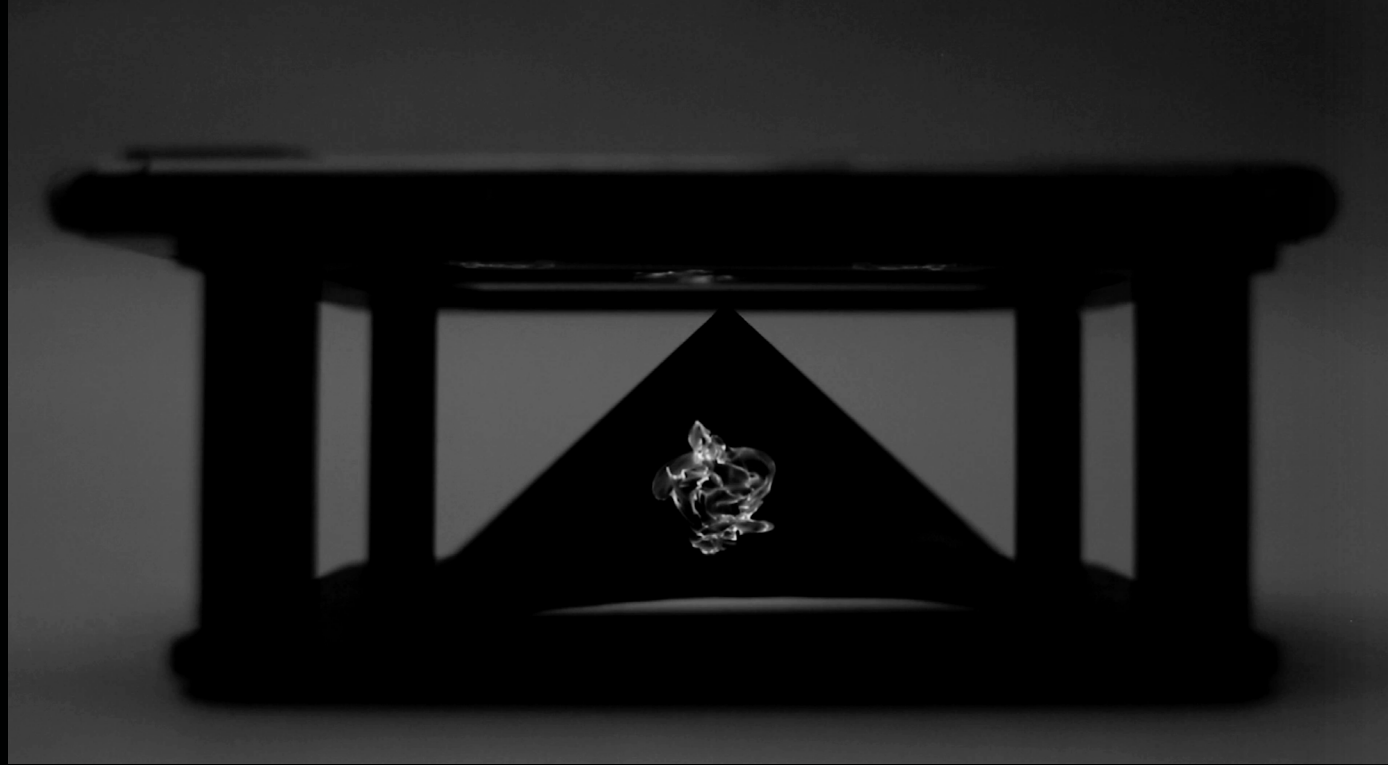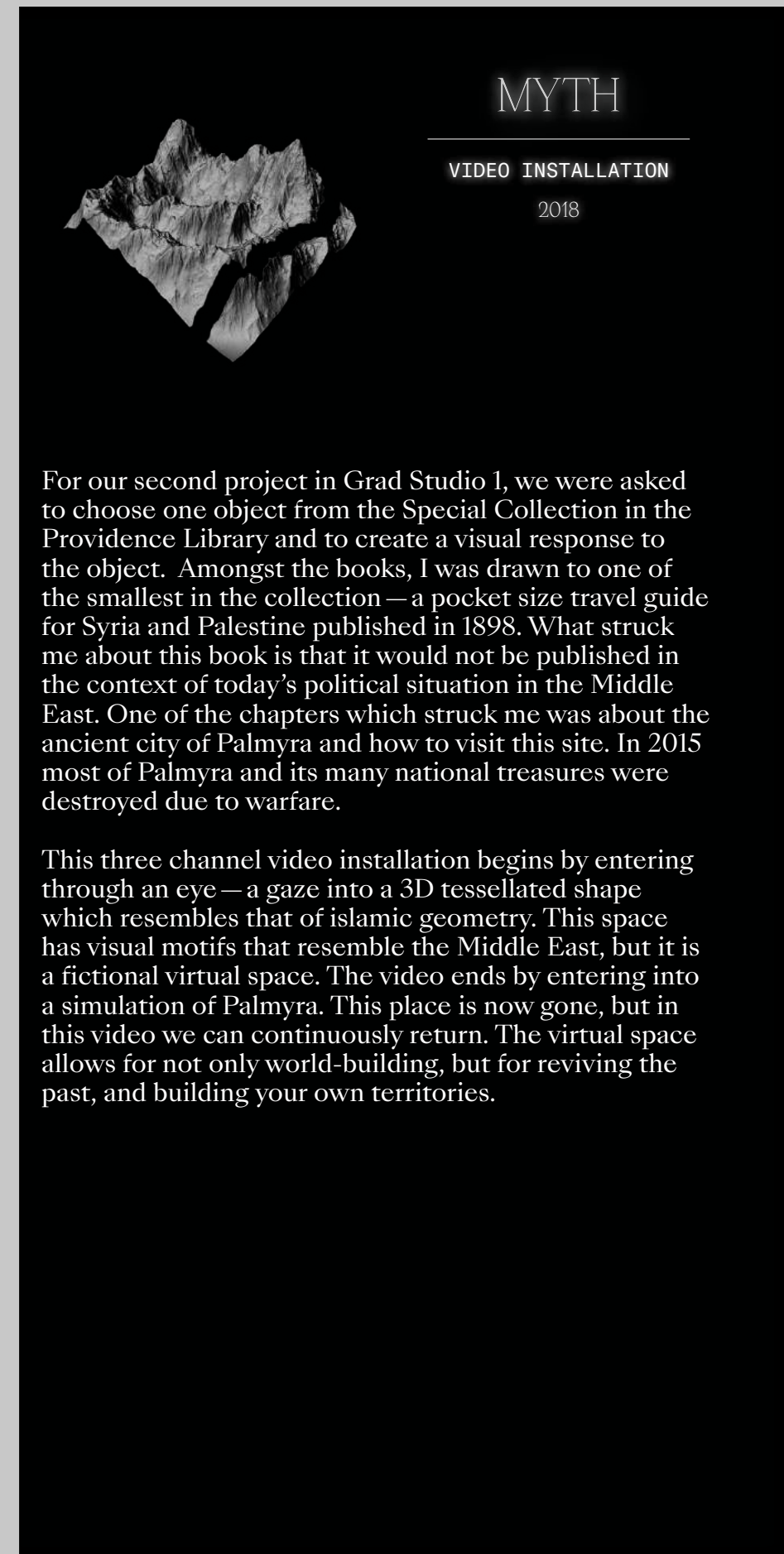
MYTH

VIDEO INSTALLATION
2018

For our second project in Grad Studio 1, we were asked to choose one object from the Special Collection in the Providence Library and to create a visual response to the object. Amongst the books, I was drawn to one of the smallest in the collection — a pocket size travel guide for Syria and Palestine published in 1898. What struck me about this book is that it would not be published in the context of today's political situation in the Middle East. One of the chapters which struck me was about the ancient city of Palmyra and how to visit this site. In 2015 most of Palmyra and its many national treasures were destroyed due to warfare.

This three channel video installation begins by entering through an eye — a gaze into a 3D tessellated shape which resembles that of islamic geometry. This space has visual motifs that resemble the Middle East, but it is a fictional virtual space. The video ends by entering into a simulation of Palmyra. This place is now gone, but in this video we can continuously return. The virtual space allows for not only world-building, but for reviving the past, and building your own territories.
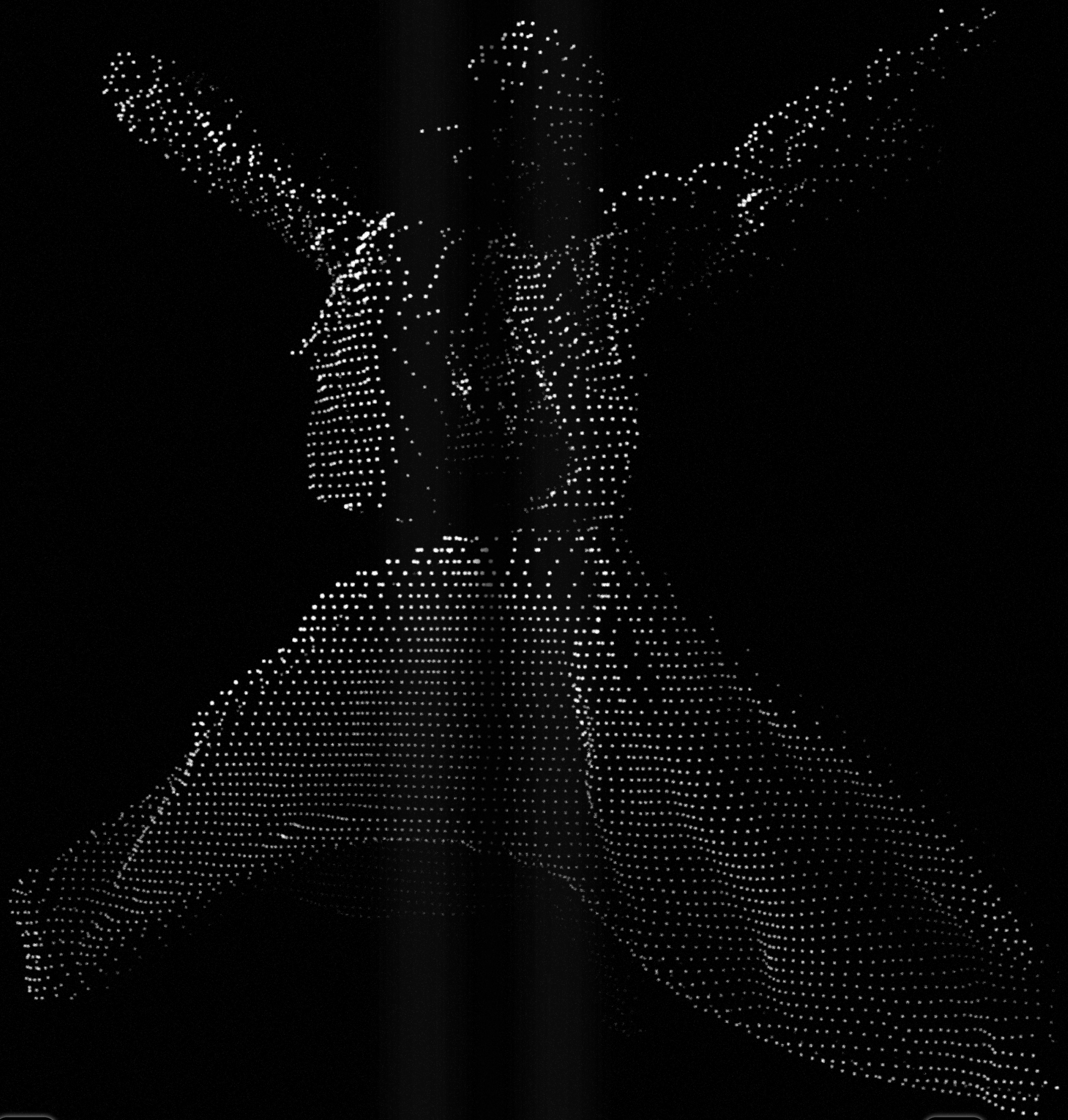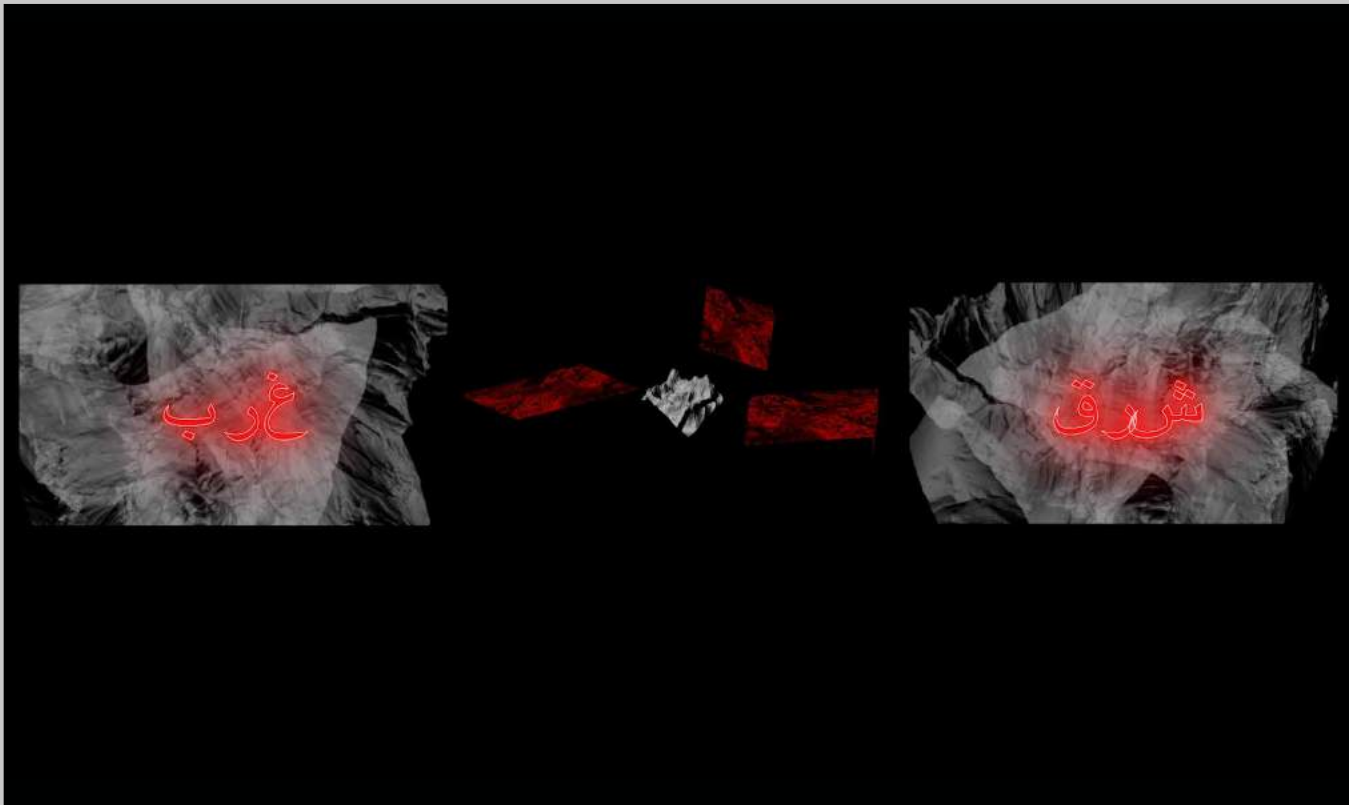
Myth, Video Still (1:30 min)
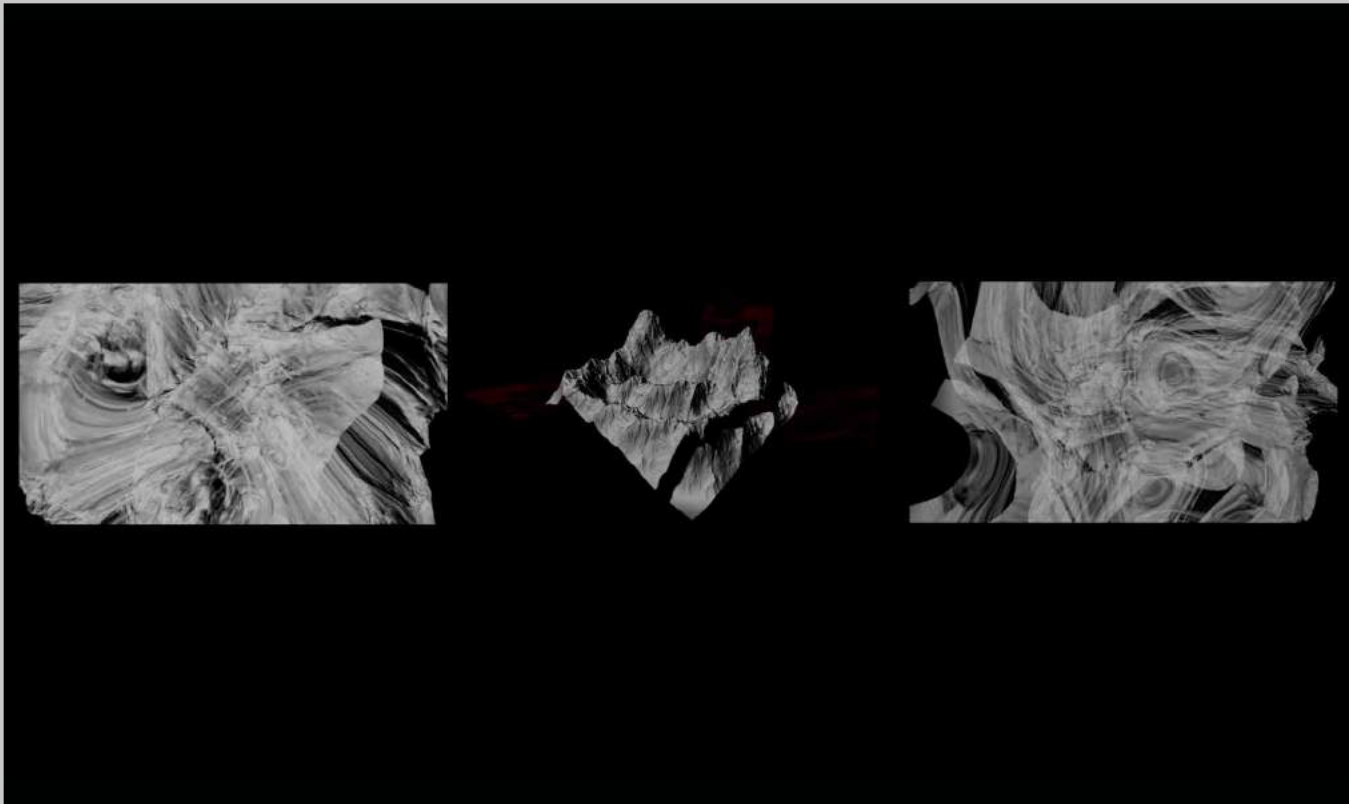
Myth, Video Still (2:15 min)
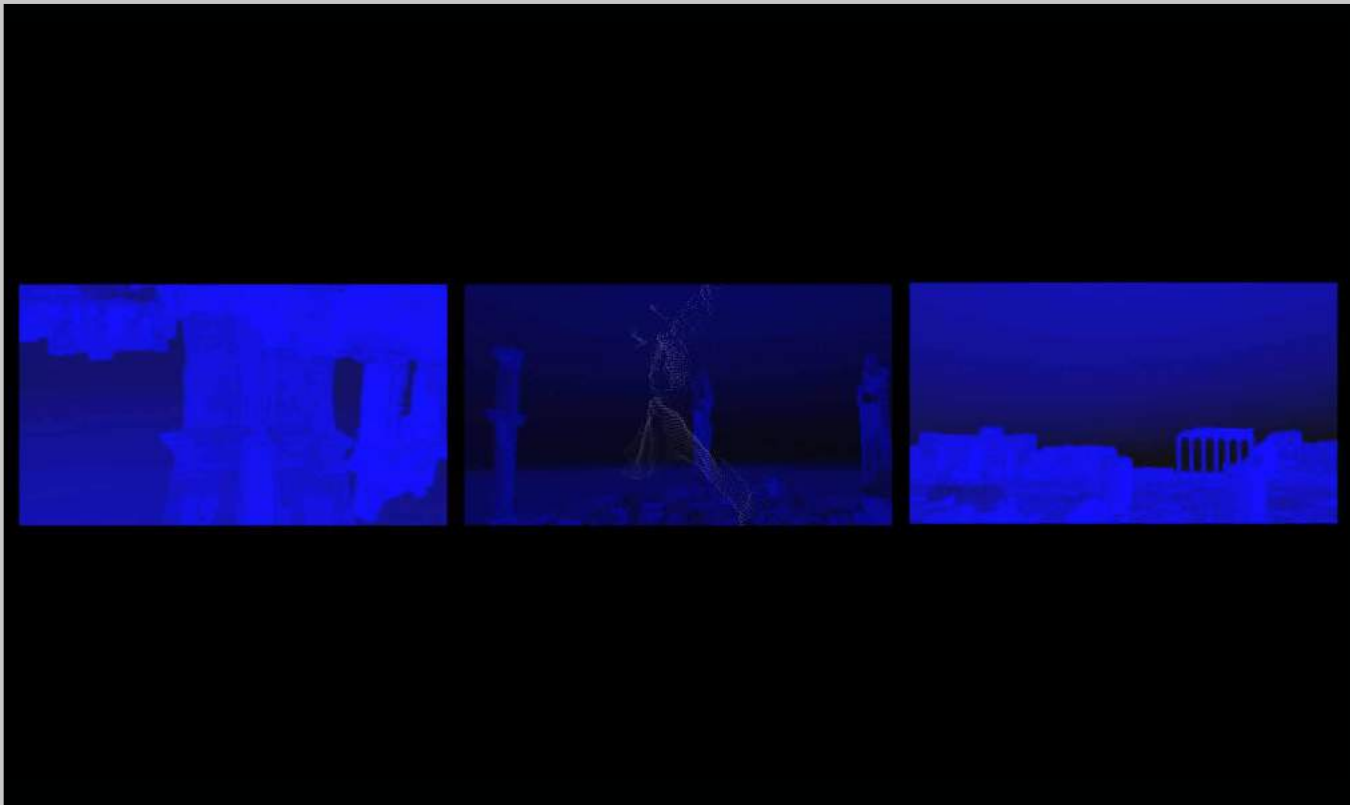
Myth, Video Still (4:23 min)
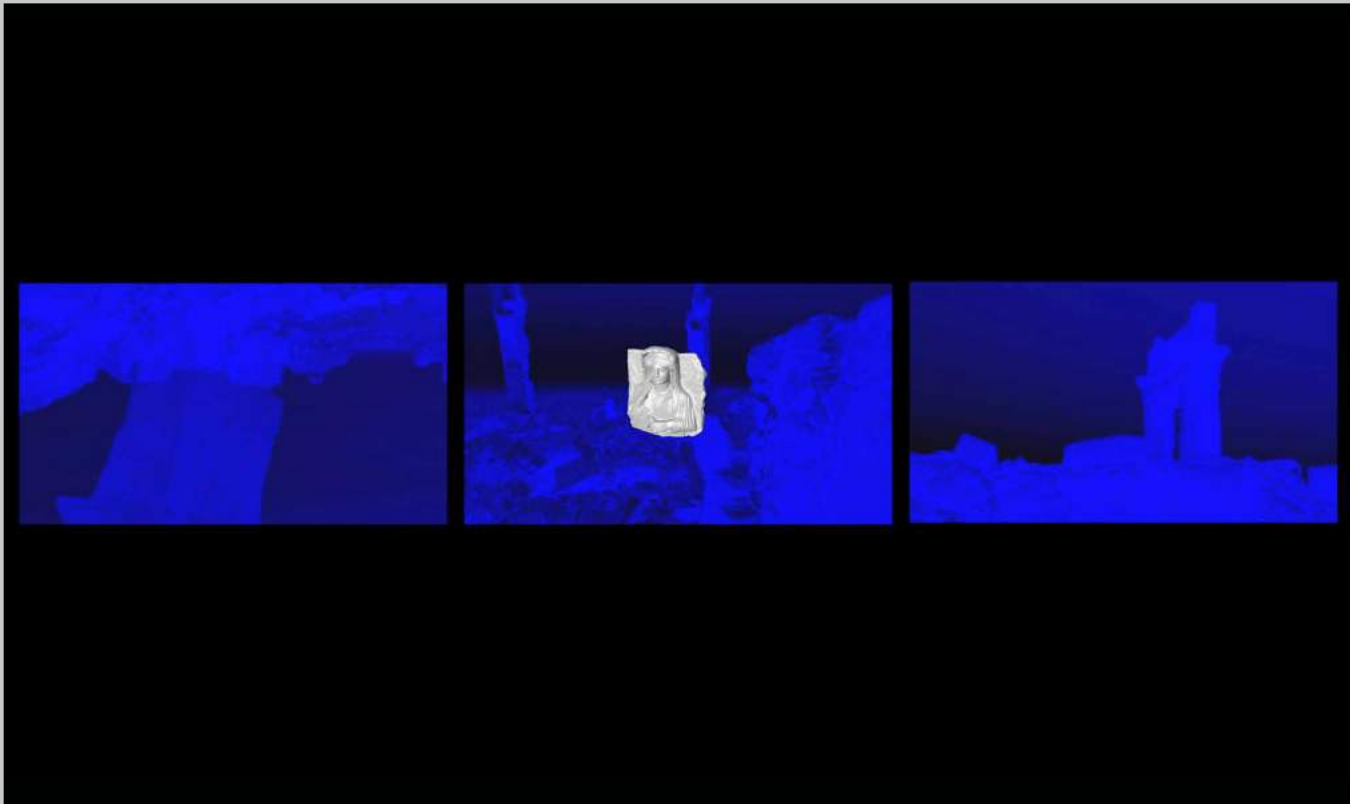
Myth, Video Still (5:32 min)

THE TEMPLE

This temple is a reimagining of the archaeological site of the Anahita Temple in Kangāvar province of Iran. This temple is attributed to the ancient deity and water goddess Anahita. In this space you can hear the sound of the water, flowing through a river. As you walk through, time stops. Water is frozen mid-motion in front of you, and at the center lies a monument in dedication to Anahita. The mirrored walls reverberate with the things they have witnessed, the visitors who have previously come to experience the sublime. Mirrors, glass, water are things that can transport sound and memory. The freezing of time is a recuperation of history, like a chamber that preserves a past that has been obscured. Like Googoosh, Anahita's figure is a sensual and powerful reminder of representations that have been forgotton. The temple is a quiet resistance to the veiling of women's voices in history.

FLOWERS OF THE NEAR EAST

POSTER, 3D SCANNING

2019

In the book *Women Who Run With The Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés, the author claims "wildlife and the wild woman are both endangered species." which led me to think about exile and the female body in exile. This brought me to ask the question from my female friends from the middle eastern diaspora, "What flower invokes a sense of nostalgia for you?" All my research and answers were received through social media and conversation, because my questions about memory and nostalgia, could not be found through Google search. I collected the data of nostalgic flowers then 3D scanned each individual species. The shape of a Rose, Carnation, Jasmine and Damascus Rose now archived, exist eternally within the digital space. A second question arose during the time of this research, "which female musician reminds you and your mother of your homeland?" Asking both generations is important with such inquiries.The result of this research is a publication and a poster series of the scanned flowers with QR codes that take you to links of the music.

What flower invokes a sense of nostalgia for you? Reminds you of your childhood home?

The Jasmine flower. It takes me back to my grandmothers back-yard in Egypt. It reminds me of sunday afternoons having lunch on the terrace. It gives me a sense of ease and calm when I smell it.

The Damascus Rose is very important for Syrians. The scent is used for rose oil which is a scent that reminds me so much of my childhood. I have a collection of perfumes with this scent.

The Carnation is very important for Palestinians. It's not our national flower but it's important to our history. I left Palestine when I was a child but the symbol of the carnation reminds me of home.

The Rose. In Iran the Rose is always present, it's not just for valentines day like it is in the west. It's part of our poetry, culture and mythology. When I smell roses it takes me back to the streets of Tehran, to the flower shops on the side of the streets.

Which musician invokes a sense of nostalgia for you or your mother?

Googoosh of course. She's the 'daughter of Iran.' Her voice magically takes everyone back to the past and future and the same time.

Her music feels like lifting a heavy weight from you shoulder.....yeah it has a lifting spirit to it.

Fairuz. She's not Palestinian but her lyrics were incredibly effective to the people of Palestine. Her song "Le Beirut" is the famous one. Talking about her love and sadness for her country.

Umm Kulthum. My dad was always a fan of hers. I would hear her music echoing in the house. He told me a story that when the war started in Palestine she would travel in the back of a truck and sing. She would be crying and so would people around her.

3D scanning process of each
individual flower.

FLOWERS OF THE NEAR EAST

JAS MI NUM

FLOWERS OF THE NEAR EAST

A climbing vine with dark-green foliage, Jasminum grandiflorum is beloved for the sweet, floral fragrance of its delicate and diminutive white flowers that bloom in late summer (while flowers tinged with pink). It differs from jasmine sambac which has fleshier white flowers. A perfumery staple, and distinctly feminine, jasmine grandiflorum absolute is the quintessence of these white, intensely floral flowers with a powdery nuance. It has been regarded for centuries as the symbol of more feminine temptation in the East. Along with rose, jasmine is a legendary plant in perfumery. Jasmine grandiflorum is now primarily grown in India and Egypt. The Egyptian absolute has more animalic notes than the of Indian-origin.

DAMAS CUS

ROSE

Rosa × damascena, more commonly known as the Damask rose, or sometimes as the rose of Castile, is a rose hybrid, derived from Rosa gallica and Rosa moschata. Further DNA analysis has shown that a third species, Rosa fedtschenkoana, is associated with the Damask rose. The flowers are renowned for their fine fragrance, and are commercially harvested for rose oil (either "rose otto" or "rose absolute") used in perfumery and to make rose water and "rose concrete". The flower petals are also edible. They may be used to flavor food, as a garnish, as an herbal tea, and preserved in sugar as gulkand. Rosa × damascena is a cultivated flower that is no longer found growing wild. Its origin was by tradition the Middle East, but recent genetic tests indicate that it is a hybrid of R. moschata x R. gallica crossed with the pollen of Rosa fedtschenkoana, which indicates that a more probable origin is the foothills of central Asia, which is the home of its pollen parent. The French Crusader Robert de Brie, who took part in the Siege of Damascus in 1148 at the second crusade, is sometimes credited for bringing the Damask rose from Syria to Europe. The name of the rose refers to the city of Damascus in Syria, known for its steel (Damask steel), fabrics (Damask) and roses.

CARN

ATION

Carnations, which go by the scientific name of Dianthus (the name given by the Greek botanist Theophrastus), are also referred to as the January birthday flower. The actual translation of this flower is "Flower of God" or "Heavenly Flower." Certain scholars state their name comes from the word "corone" (which translates to flower garlands) or "coronation" because of its use in Greek ceremonial crowns. Others have suggested this floral variant is derived from the Latin word "carnis" (meaning flesh) and refers to the flower's initial pink hue or "incarnacyon" (which translates to incarnation), and stands for the incarnation of God-made-flesh.

HIRAD SAB

Still from *Marilyn Monroe* Music Video for
Sevdaliza (directed by Hirad Sab, 2016)

Hirad Sab is an Iranian-American artist and visual director whose work explores the margins of digital aesthetics, internet culture, and technology. His amalgams occupy a precarious intersection of culture and the democratic nature of image circulation; an aesthetic trend that expands and mutates rapidly. Sab's work has been described as simultaneously distant and close, drawing the viewer in, even as it challenges them to look away, and heavily features depictions of the human form, gesture, and activity in distinctly digital environments. The result is in an emblematic and distinguishable oeuvre that resists easy classification. Currently he is studying for his Master's at UCLA Design Media Arts program.

SL

Hello Hirad! Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. I have been such a fan of your work for years, so I really appreciate this opportunity to speak with you.

HS

Of course thank you for reaching out and finding interest in my practice.

SL

I very distinctly remember when I discovered your work a few years ago and someone I was following on twitter retweeted a video work of yours. There was no title or description, I just clicked on it and it was a shot of the back of a figure standing on top of a rooftop but in the background there was the Milad Tower; So in that moment I thought okay that's Tehran, but it's also not Tehran, because there was this sort of hyper chromatic layer over the landscape with synthetic textured sound in the background. It looked like a future vision of Iran, a scene from a science-fiction film set in Tehran, it was a visual language that I had not seen before. And from there of course I searched and discovered your work and have been following from there. I was wondering if you could tell me about your practice and how you found your way to working in the space you're in right now?

HS

Yeah, it's been a strange journey because I never saw myself dipping my toes into this artistic practice. I did my undergrad as a software engineer, and before that I was originally thinking about medical school as a path. I feel like my practice initially started as a form of escapism in the sense of trying to juxtapose these notions that I have of old home and new home. Particularly in the beginning, a lot of the work that I produced dealt with these types of sentiments and the semiotics of it was really one of diaspora, so to speak. That kind of continued for a while and then I decided that some people out there resonated with my work. I want to pursue an art practice more professionally and academically, so here I am doing my Master's with excitement and regret, and a lot of mixed feelings, but overall it's been an interesting journey.

The way that my work came about was really DIY. I feel that maybe if I had prior access to a creative space, maybe I would have completely diverged from exploring digital means,

Still from *Mudafossil* Music Video for Ash Koosha (directed by Hirad Sab, 2016)

perhaps towards more traditional mediums. A lot of my practice involves the tools and the software. I think it comes down to process and some of my works explicitly try to allude to the process and the software itself.

SL

The main software program you use to create your virtual spaces is in the program *Blender*. I discovered the program also through researching your work and have been working in this space ever since.

HS

Yeah, it's nice. It's easy and it's fast.

SL

I read in your interview with *VICE* that you think of the 3D space as "a reflection of the migrant experience." I'm curious to hear more about this notion—I think for me personally I went to the virtual space because I didn't know how else to communicate the narratives which I wanted to

speak about, but in a safe space. So I am curious what this space means to you.

HS

It's interesting because I'm also thinking about that myself right now for the thesis project that we're doing, but I think part of it has to do with this reconfiguration of the felt experiences of reality. To some degree the openness, availability and faculties that the 3D space affords are very attractive in the sense that it allows you to romanticize things that are of interest to you. When I left Iran I was around 18, I wouldn't describe my experience in Iran as pleasant for the time that I was there. There are things that I really love about it and things that I miss, but overall I feel the experience was very raw and gritty. It's kind of like a Burial song—it's funny that you mentioned that earlier. I feel Burial is the perfect soundtrack for living in Tehran. So I think, when I left Iran, I did not meet the expectations that I had for my destination, which was the U.S. So I think this subconsciously pushed me towards this romanticism of home and a critique of the new environment that I'm in. Given the symbolism that exists in the Persian

literature, and things you grow up listening to, music, or sounds from "Shabeh Yalda" or "Norooz," Persian poetry, I feel these are references that are constantly recurring.

Here in the U.S there are also things that are constantly recurring, like the materiality of things that we deal with. I think the virtual space initially provided me an opportunity to juxtapose these contradictions—past experience, current expectations and future speculation and to condense and compress all of them into these synthetic imageries. Though I feel as I started exploring the virtual medium, I quickly became more interested in the medium itself rather than what could be translated or communicated through it. I don't know if there is a conscious or calculated progression of my work,

> "When I left Iran I was around 18, I wouldn't describe my experience in Iran as pleasant for the time that I was there, there are things that I really love about it and things that I miss, but overall I feel the experience was very raw and gritty. It's kind of like a Burial song."

but at this point I am interested in the virtuality that is afforded by these mediums, and how does that sit in relation to the actuality that we experience. Things that we can see , the reality in and of itself, and what lies in the juxtaposition or contradiction that could be constructed using these tools and mediums.

SL

It seems like this virtual space is a place where fragments of contradictions can all come together and be juxtaposed, and it really doesn't need to make sense.

HS

Exactly.

SL

I was wondering if you could tell me about the Growth Nodes feature that you developed for Blender?

HS

(Laughs) That was really an offshoot. That was basically my senior project for my undergraduate studies. I tried to combine my 3D experiences with my skills within software development and condense that into some type of concentrated effort. I'm very much interested in this idea of liveliness and mimicry of existence, in the sense of how it could happen in these softwares. Actually, I think that video that you mentioned earlier that caught your attention the first time, one of the strongest effects of that video is the constant breathing of the person. There is this visceral, real mimicry that is happening in relation to the real. I think that plugin is also focused on mimicry. When we talk about growth it carries this weight of continuity and time, to be existing through time. This impossibility of moving forward and back and being subjected to the limitations of time. In that way I think it was an exploration of life, although very preliminary, very distant and very ambiguous compared to our conception of a day to day interaction with a friend or with a partner for example. This is more on a microscopic bacterial level, or at a very high scale macroscopic and geological, but nevertheless it is related to existence through time.

SL

How does time function in the virtual space and is it different than how we as humans experience time? It's interesting that in many of your time-based works there are these chromatic posthuman figures frozen in time, but there is still a sense of movement and motion in the video, the sense that time is passing.
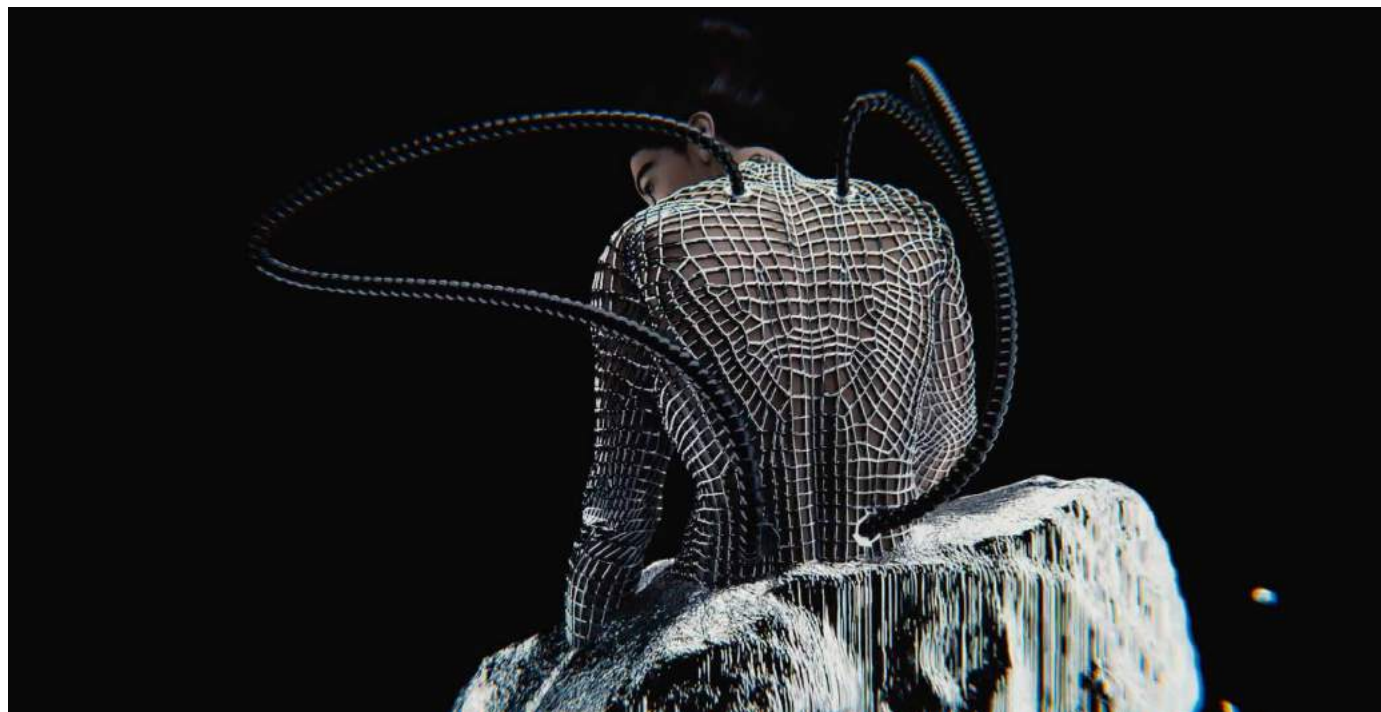
Still from *Marilyn Monroe* Music Video for Sevdaliza (directed by Hirad Sab, 2016)

Still from *I Feel That*, from *GUUD* by Ash Koosha (directed by Hirad Sab, 2015)

HS

I feel time is a concept usually imposed. For instance you're working with Unity/VR which could very well be translated into some type of linear experience. A linear narration that is happening from A to B in the span of let's say 4, 10, 15 minutes of your choosing. I find it an interesting experience. Working with music has been really interesting for me (Ash Koosha music videos etc), particularly with music that is devoid of vocals because you effectively have this prescription of the kind of affect that you want your piece to carry, and that comes to an extent from the music. The role I effectively had to play was to create a visual field that can complement that experience, and the provocation that's coming from the music. So in that sense, time and its linearity, or lack thereof, is prescribed by the music.

"The virtual space initially provided me an opportunity to juxtapose these contradictions—past experience, current expectations and future speculation and to condense and compress all of them into these synthetic imageries."

But I wonder the necessity of linearity in these virtual spaces, or more than often the lack of it. Ian Cheng for example uses these notions a lot in their works. The narrative fundamentally is around the idea of continuity but what you are looking at is a simulation. Simulations are effectively entangled with the idea of progression of time. Nevertheless, this prescribed time is not coming from some sort of narrative as you would

experience in film or cinema. You're not following a story, you're following a progression solely for the sake of progression itself. I think that's an interesting take on time in virtual spaces. Exploration of time solely for the sake of time and the passage of time, right? I also feel you can really push this extremity on the other side of the spectrum and attempt to completely break time. I imagine a virtual space where things are 48 hours—the first day is 48 hours and the second is 60 hours and exponentially increases. Hypothetically if you have a subject spending the entirety of the time in this space, how does that affect their notion of time, movement and aging? Or you could completely break it down and have this very dissected, fragmented arrangement of time and temporal experience.

SL

I love all of your collaborations with artist Ash Koosha. Leading up to this interview I went back and read your description for one of my favorite videos, *Mudafossil*, and how this piece "symbolically reinterprets our struggle with the notions of 'self' and 'spiritual truth' and follows the journey of the modern man through the esoteric path (Tariqat) towards mystical truth (Haqiqa) and finally unto mystica (Marifa) or the ultimate knowledge. I thought oh "that's so cool, so you are also thinking about Sufi mysticism, or sort of this ancient divine that is maybe informing the visuals." Can you speak about your collaborations with Ash Koosha, the process and conversations leading up to creating the visual landscapes for his audio soundscapes?

HS

I think one of the things that really resonates with me regarding this kind of mysticism, goes back to the literal definition of the word, and looking at where we live and what we deal with, I feel everything is very explicit in how we interact with it, be it emotions, materiality, consumption, any kind of social financial engagement that we have.

It feels very didactic, very on the surface in the sense that you know what you're effectively dealing with. It's funny, because I feel even with advertisements, we've come to a level of literacy on a mass scale that we see, and we think "okay they're showing me xyz" but at the end of the day, it's all pointing to the fact that they want me to purchase this type of product.

Nevertheless, I feel in this type of environment we automatically start yearning for a level of ambiguity. I think you can see that to some degree with music. In the past two decades there has been such a crazy proliferation of non-vocal and instrumental music, and I think part of that has to do with the fact that it leaves room for a self-directed engagement; a self-directed construction of this sonic reality, that you try to receive and imagine. The reason I'm bringing this up is that I think Iranian literature really has that affordance in the sense of ambiguity. For example you hear a verse about drinking wine in a poem, and then there's this contemplation of okay, what is this wine that we're speaking of? Who is this person that the poet is drinking for and what is their yearning? Is it for the truth? Is it for their lover? Is it for God? You can interpret it however you want, but I think what matters most in this context is that it is very much open to interpretation. Nevertheless, I feel throughout my work I always gravitate towards this idea of a conscious mobilization of ambiguity in the image. Only telling enough that I fulfill my duties as the creator of the piece, but also leaving room for the viewer to construct their own emotion, interaction and interpretation of the work.

SL

I love what you said about this notion of yearning in both Iranian literature and poetry, as well as electronic music. That's something I am thinking a lot about—what are the qualities that make certain works experiential and affect based, and so emotive.

SL

I love all the work that you've done with Sevdaliza. I had a similar moment with discovering her work as I did with yours, and being drawn to her audiovisual landscape and not knowing she is Iranian, but just being drawn to the work. I'm listening to her album and then there's a song with words being spoken in Farsi, and I remember it being this sort of haunting, goosebumps moment, but in the most positive way—the realization that you were drawn to something that you don't know much about, but then realizing you have more connection to it than you originally thought. I was wondering if you could tell me about your collaboration together?

HS

Our collaboration happened very organically. I have a strange network of friends on Facebook and she was part of it. During that time I was posting a lot of my images on facebook and just trying to see how this community interacts with them. So she reached out to me and apparently she had a dream where I created a metallic skull. In her dream, she didn't know what I looked like but she said she had a 'feeling' that it was me in her dream. So in a very strange way, in a 'mystical' way so to speak, that came to be our collaboration on the *Marilyn Monroe* video. I feel the process was quite organic in the sense that, I would listen to the song and we would discuss for a while what is it that she is trying to convey, and how can that be augmented and complemented with the visual aspect. So we came to the conclusion of exploring the ideas of synthetic beauty, constructed beauty, and the outcome of this was the Marilyn Monroe music video. Since then have sporadically collaborated here and there. And it's been a fruitful engagement.

"I always gravitate towards this idea of a 'conscious mobilization of ambiguity in the image.' Only telling enough that I fulfill my duties as the creator of the piece, but also leaving room for the viewer to construct their own emotion, interaction and interpretation of the work. "

Children Of The Silk, Album Art for Sevdaliza, (visuals by Hirad Sab, 2015)

Children Of The Silk, Album Art for Sevdaliza
(Visuals by Hirad Sab, 2015)

Still from *Mudafossil* Music Video for Ash
Koosha (directed by Hirad Sab, 2016)
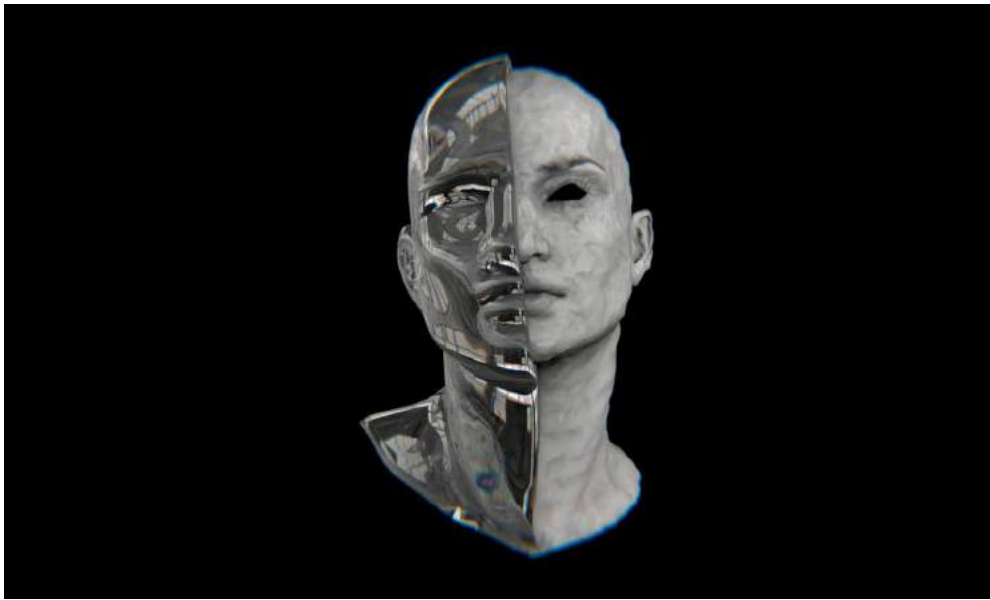
I'm curious how you describe your visual aesthetic. Words that come to mind for me when I look at your work are 'hyper chrome' or perhaps '3D petroleum.' What are some inspirations that have informed your visual language and world?

It's interesting that you bring that up because I feel much like any other practice, you have to deal with the affordance of the medium, restrictions of time, and in this case, with these types of images and computational capabilities. The way this aesthetic really came about initially was because of all these limitations. It is effectively the fastest way to create something that is visually pleasing and engaging, but at the same time it's computationally really cheap, versus having realistic skin. Although in the last five to six years this has changed drastically, particularly with the introduction of photorealistic PBR based game engines, UNITY's HDRP pipeline, and Unreal Engine. You know, everyone is trying to push hyper-realistic and photo-realistic image capabilities. Whereas it used to be software only, now we see that it is effectively hardware — companies like NVDIA, in a very concerted effort are trying to push that with their technologies. At the time this aesthetic really came about for me, at the expense of computational limitations, and I started just liking it and it's continued from there. It's interesting that you bring up this notion of 3D Petroleum, because what's happening there is really a kind of refraction that is happening on a physical level with the water in the pieces you referred to. I feel the aesthetics that I was exploring in the early pieces you referred to deals a lot with the caustics and reflectivity both on a physical and meta level.

Can I ask what you are working on now with your thesis, if that's not too big of a question?

I'm working on the implications on hyper photo-realism that's happening right now. I'm really trying to grapple with these images that are indistinguishable from photo captures and photography, and how this sits with photos that we assume to be true. What is basically the boundary between photo as evidence and photo as this synthetic computational entity that we manufacture, and how will these synthetic virtual images affect our relationship to image as a carrier of truth or what we assume it to be. So to some degree it's very similar to the conversations that are happening around deep fakes, but I'm exploring that in the realm of image and image-making itself rather than the socio-political implications of photo realism.

Last question: what are you currently listening to?

Oh wow, musically I am so dry (laughs) it's been like that for a while, but I used to listen to a lot of music but now I think I just haven't had the time for it. I feel like a lot of the communities that I was really engaged with have dissolved in this landscape of streaming. I'm not really a fan of Spotify because back in the day SoundCloud used to be such a vibrant place for exploring music. I feel musically I've become a bit more 'violent' (laughs) I listen to alot of hard electronic and techno and things like that.
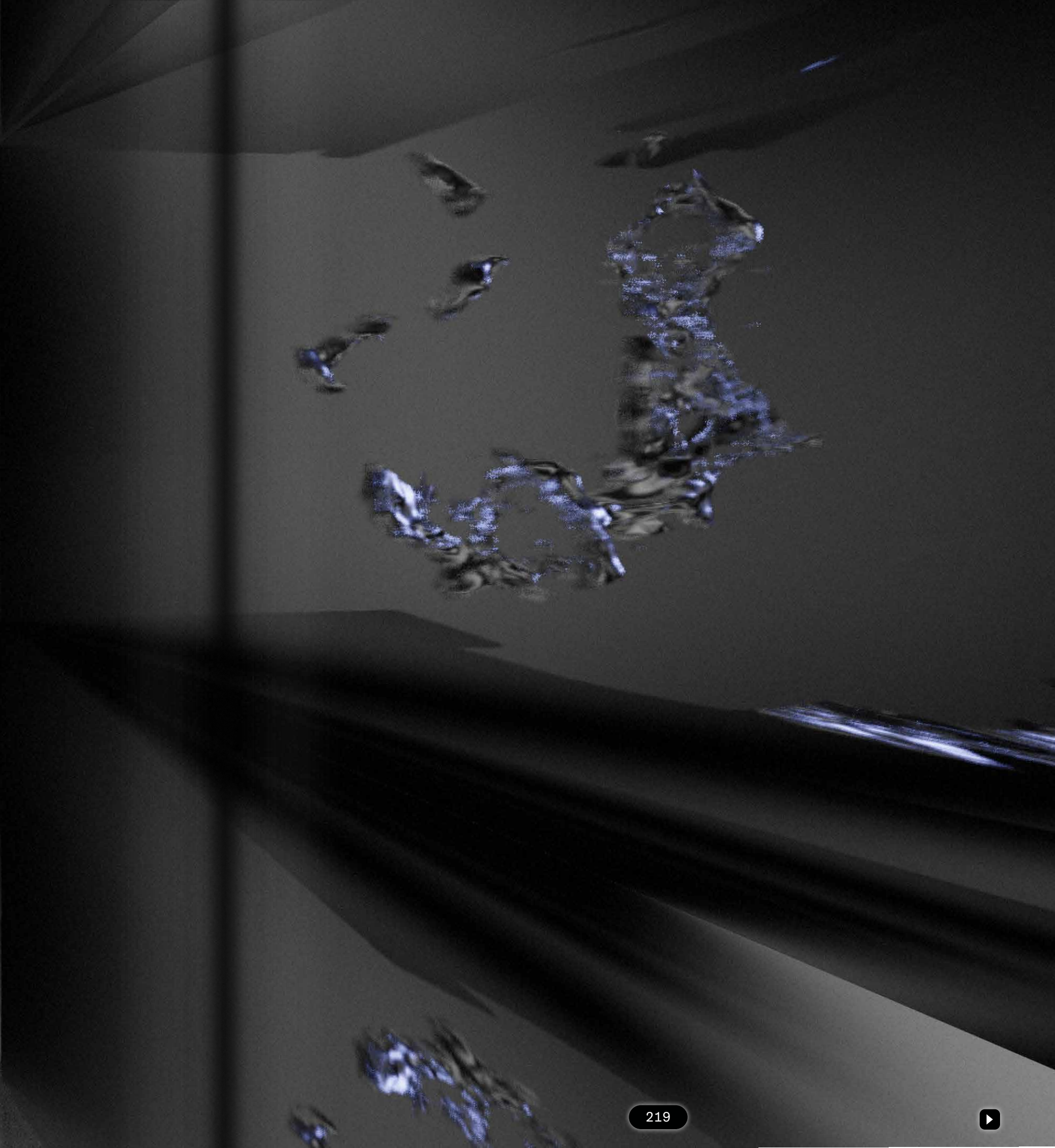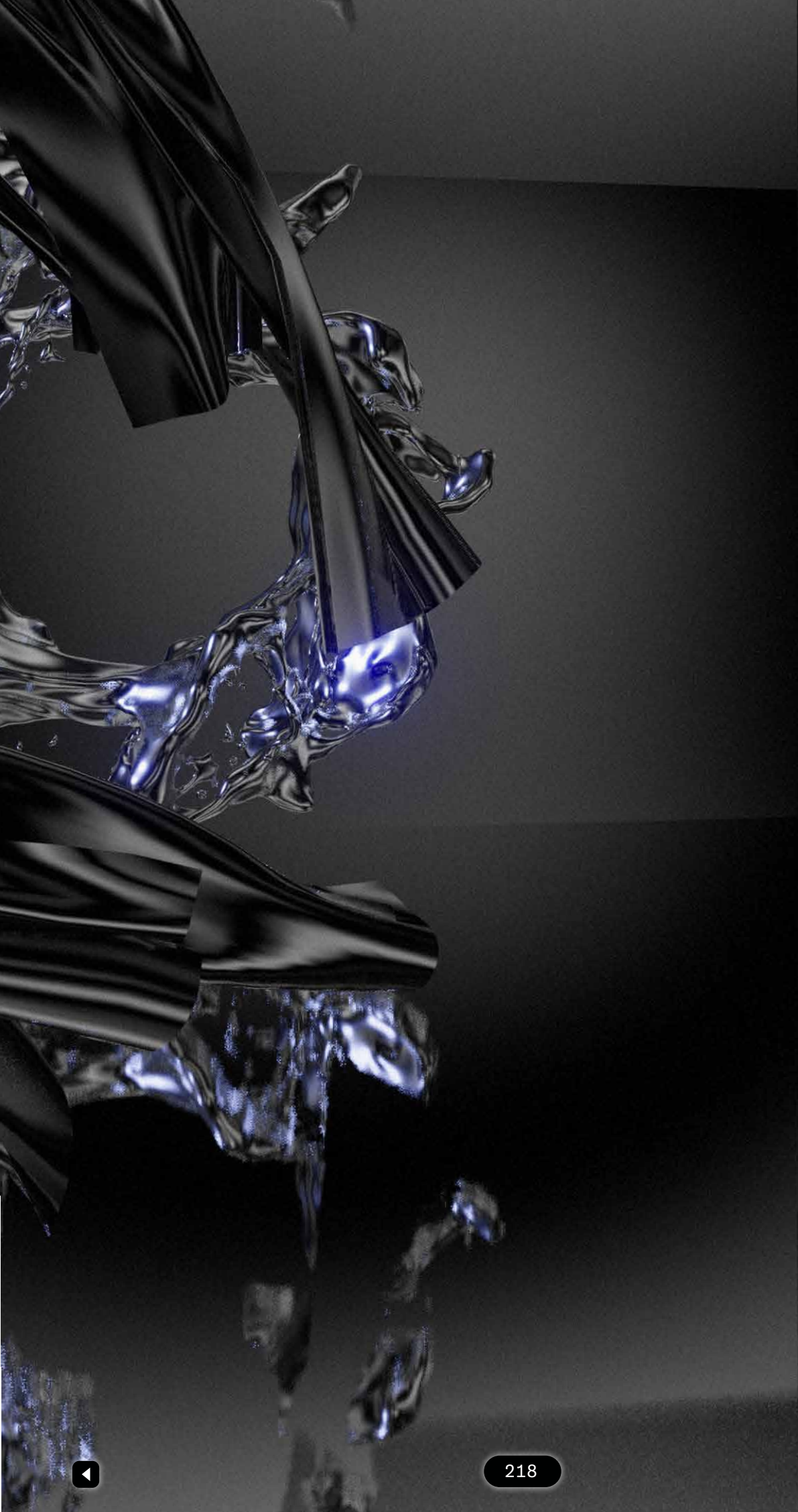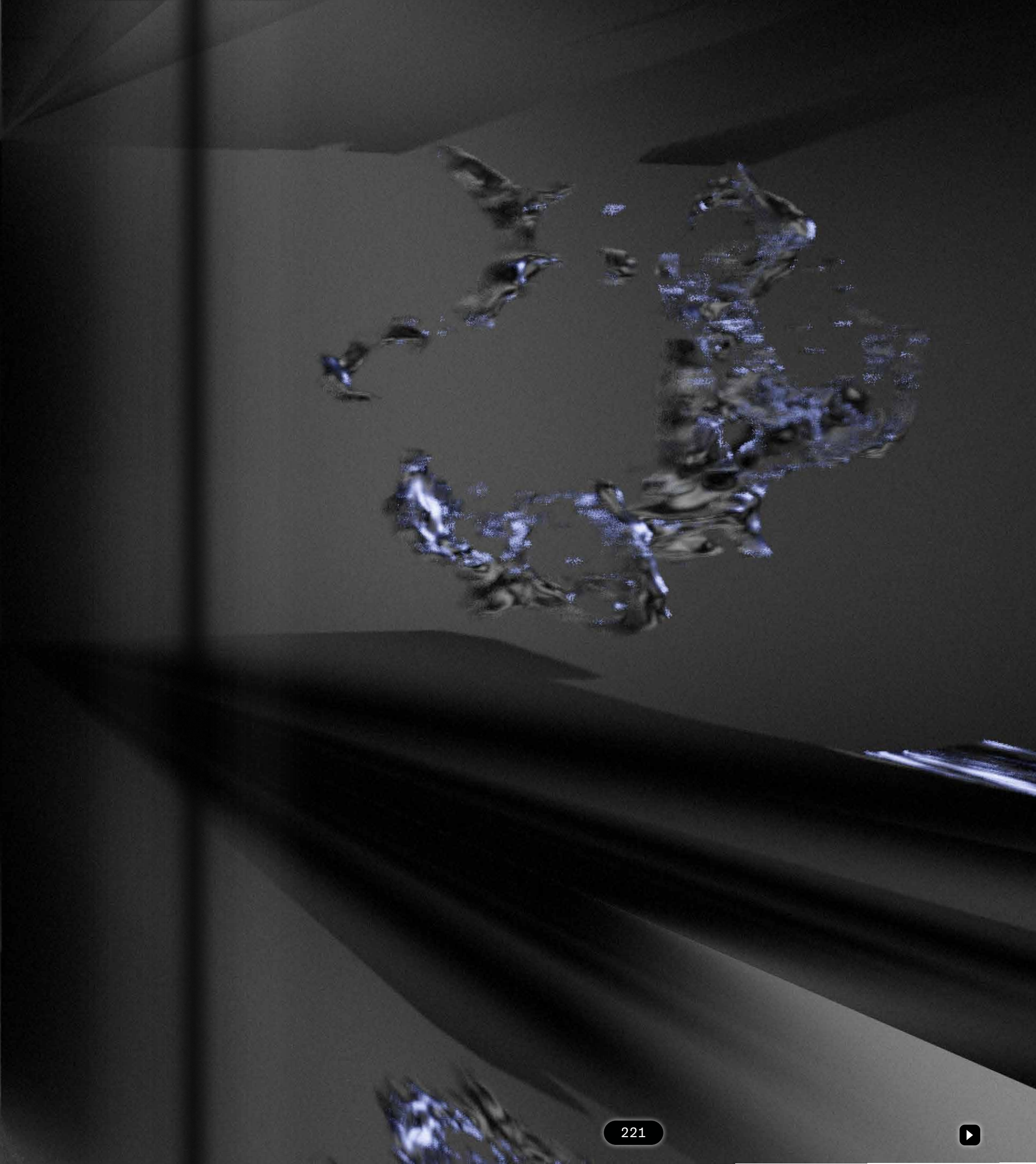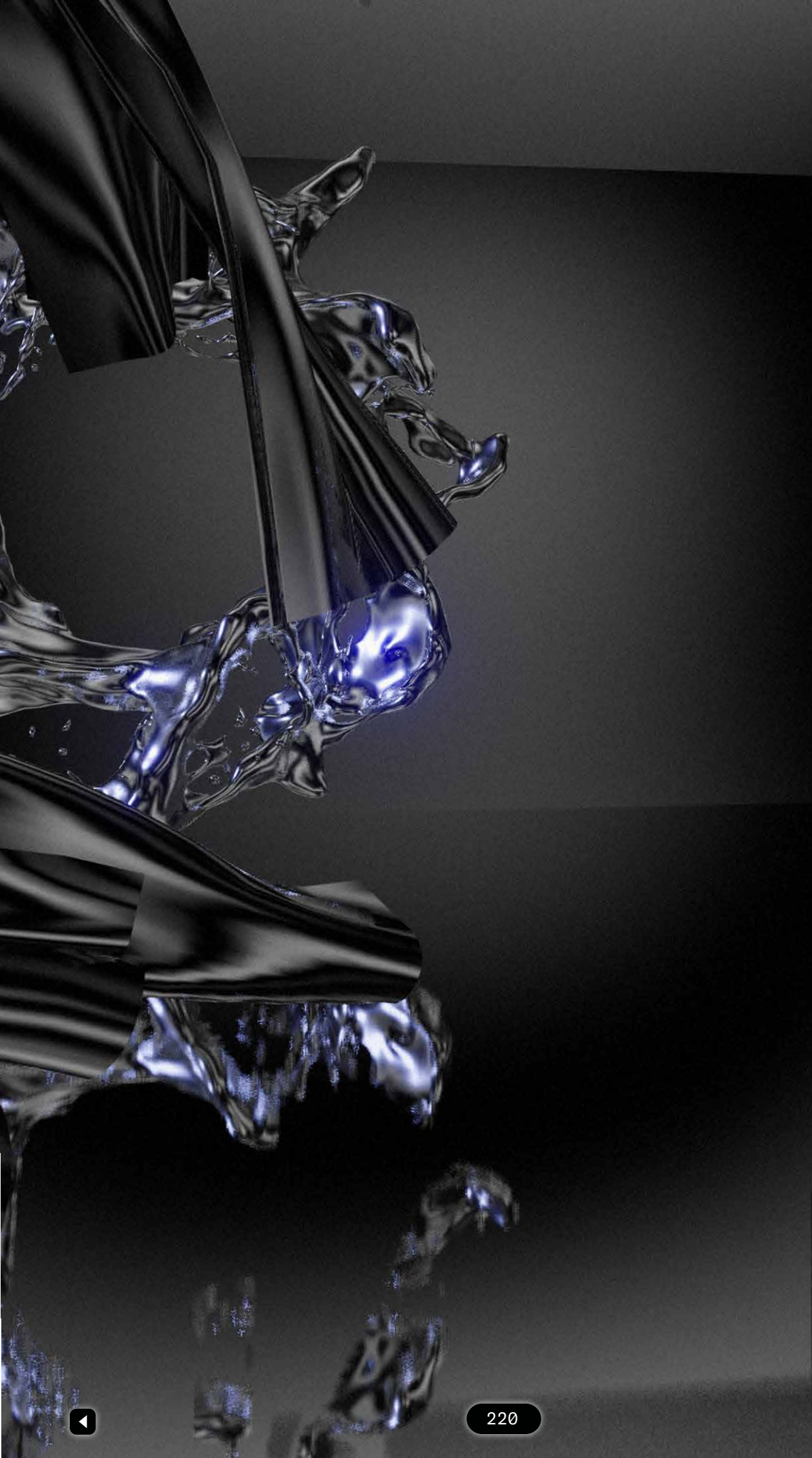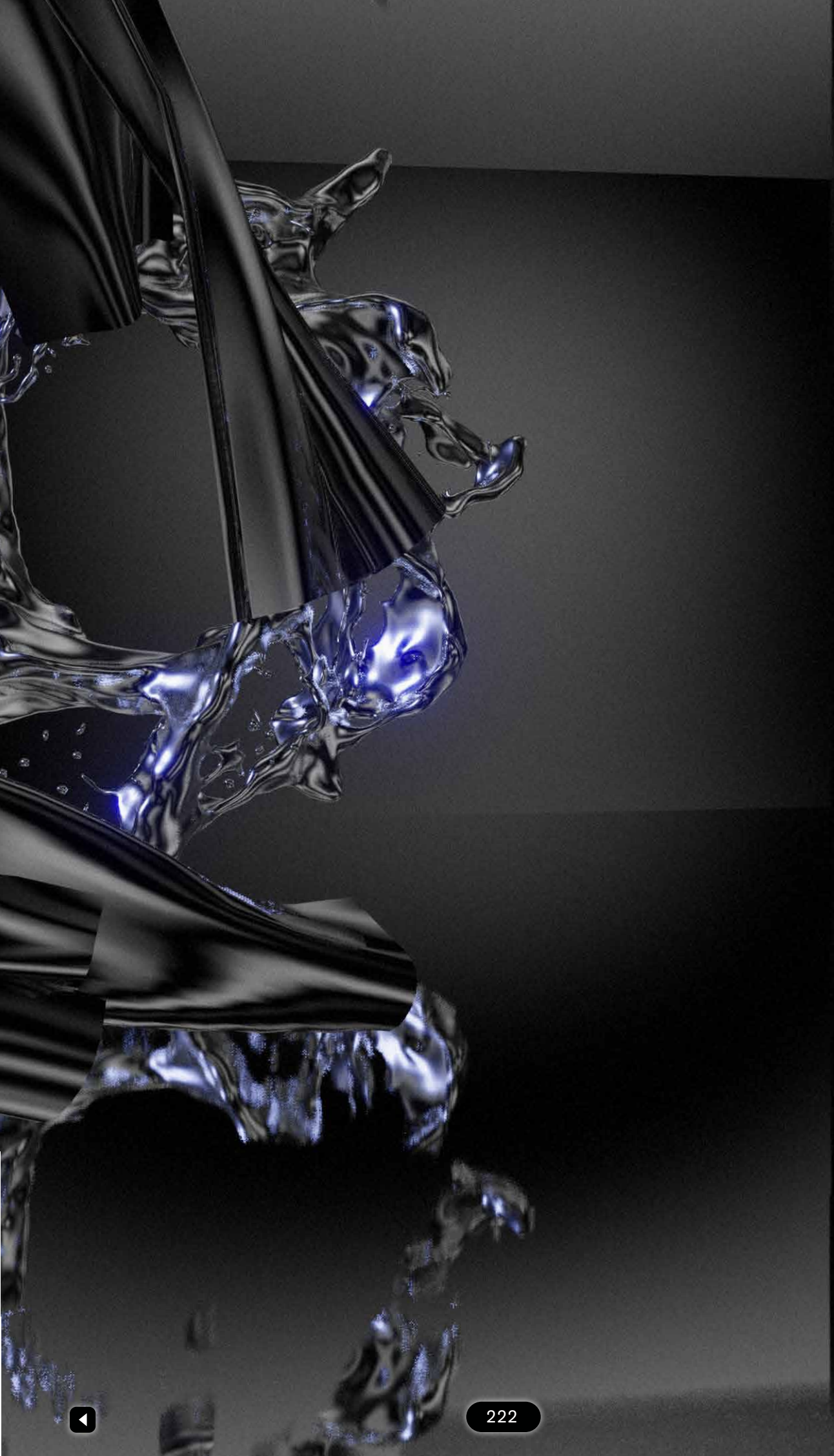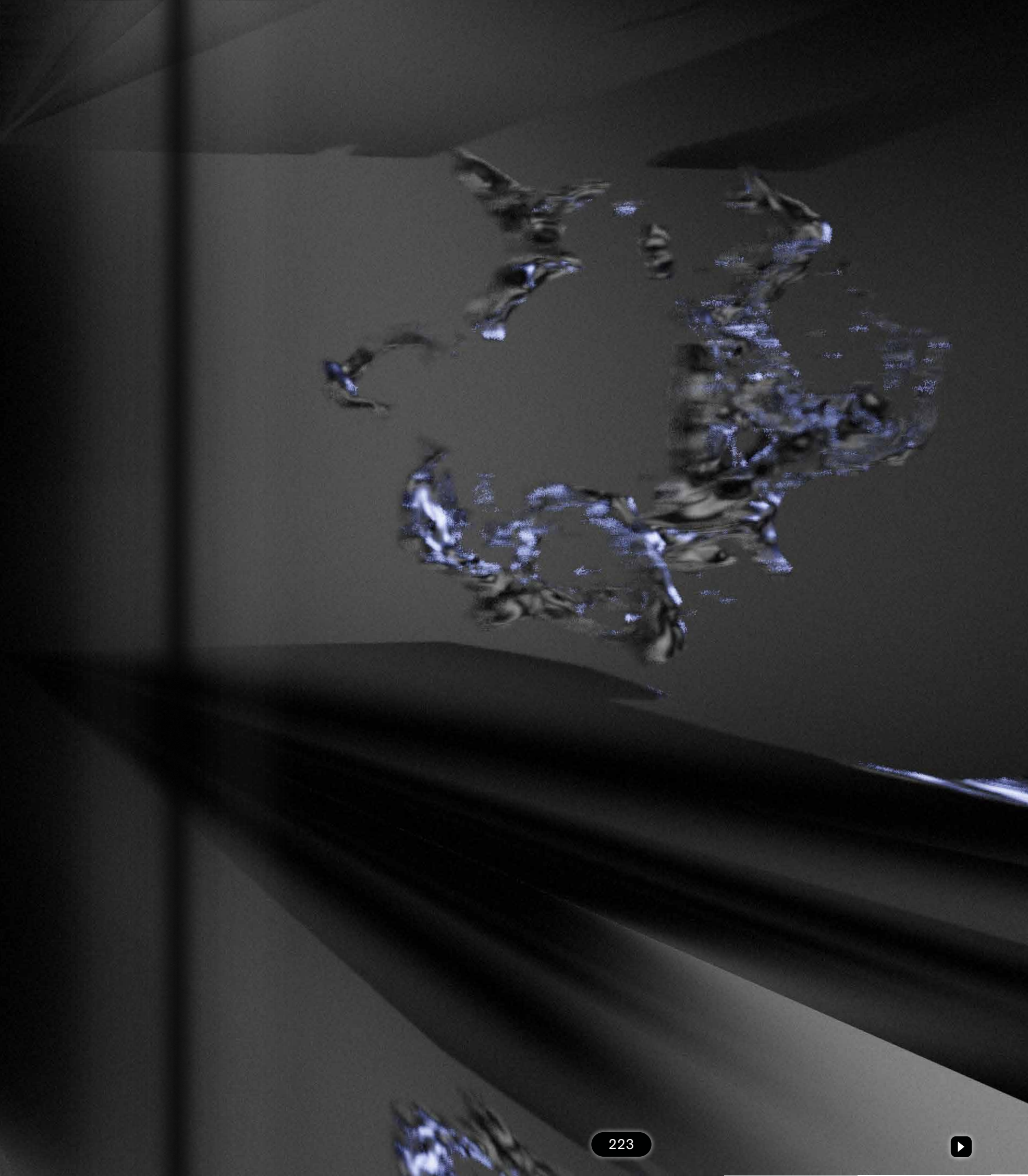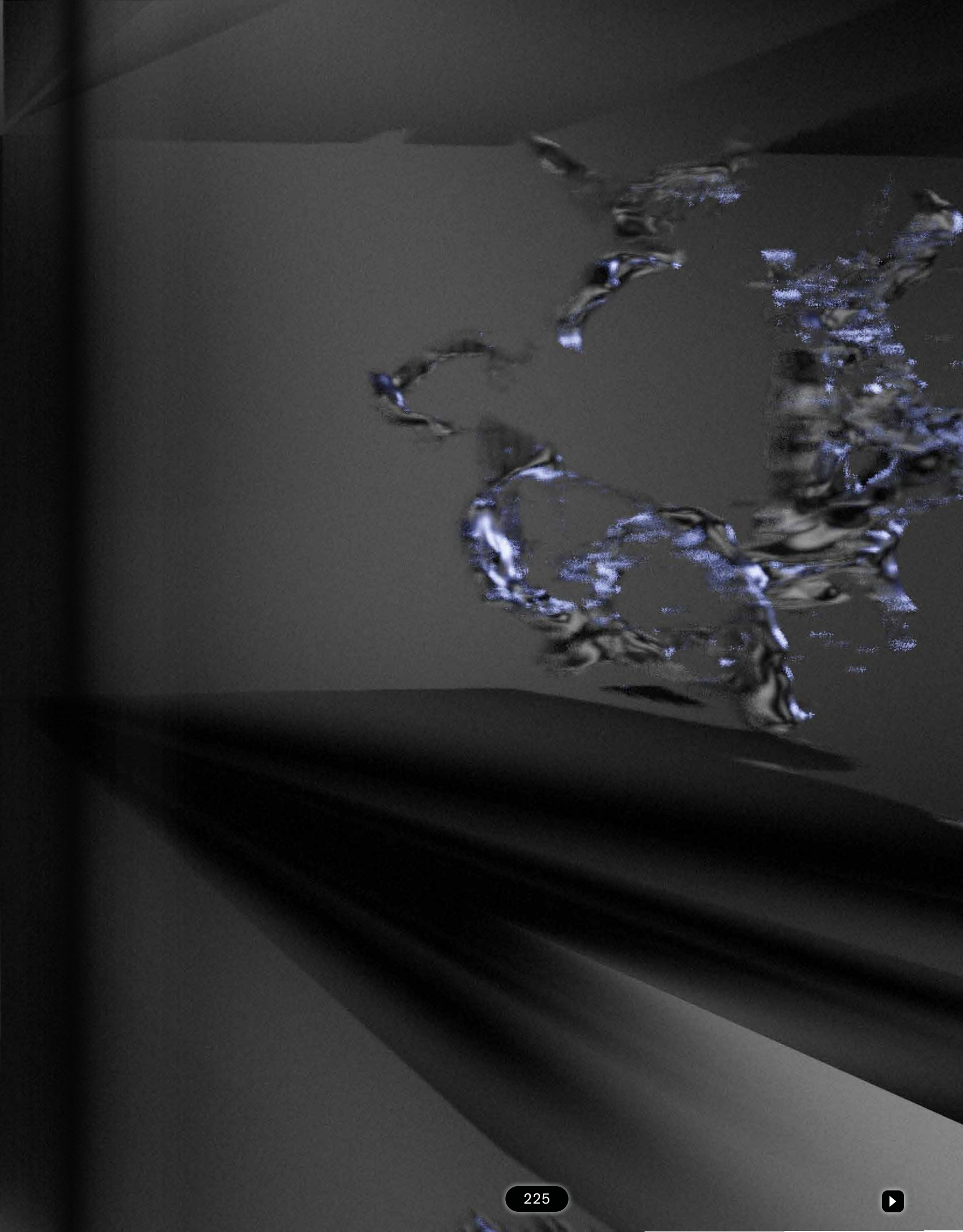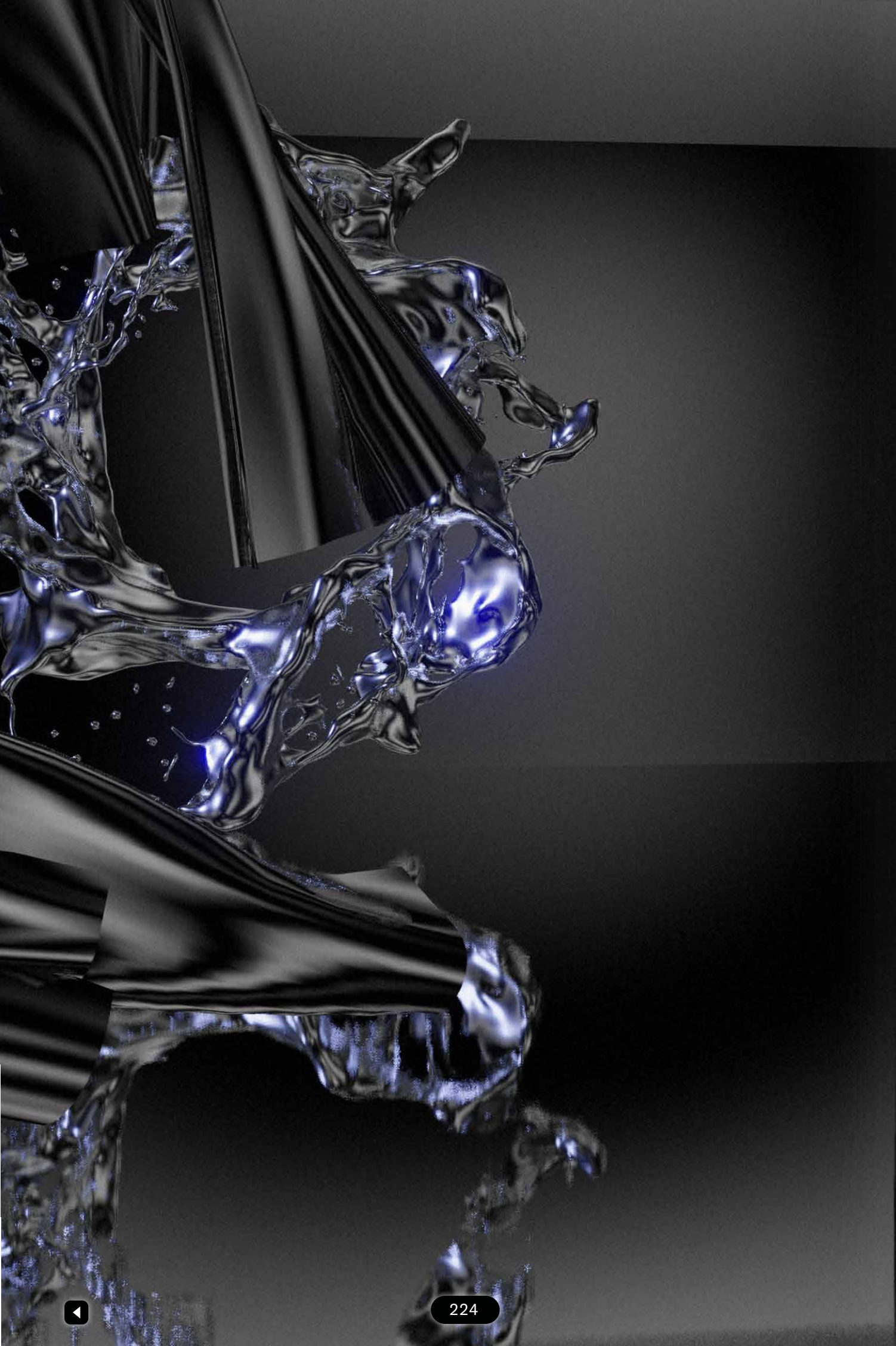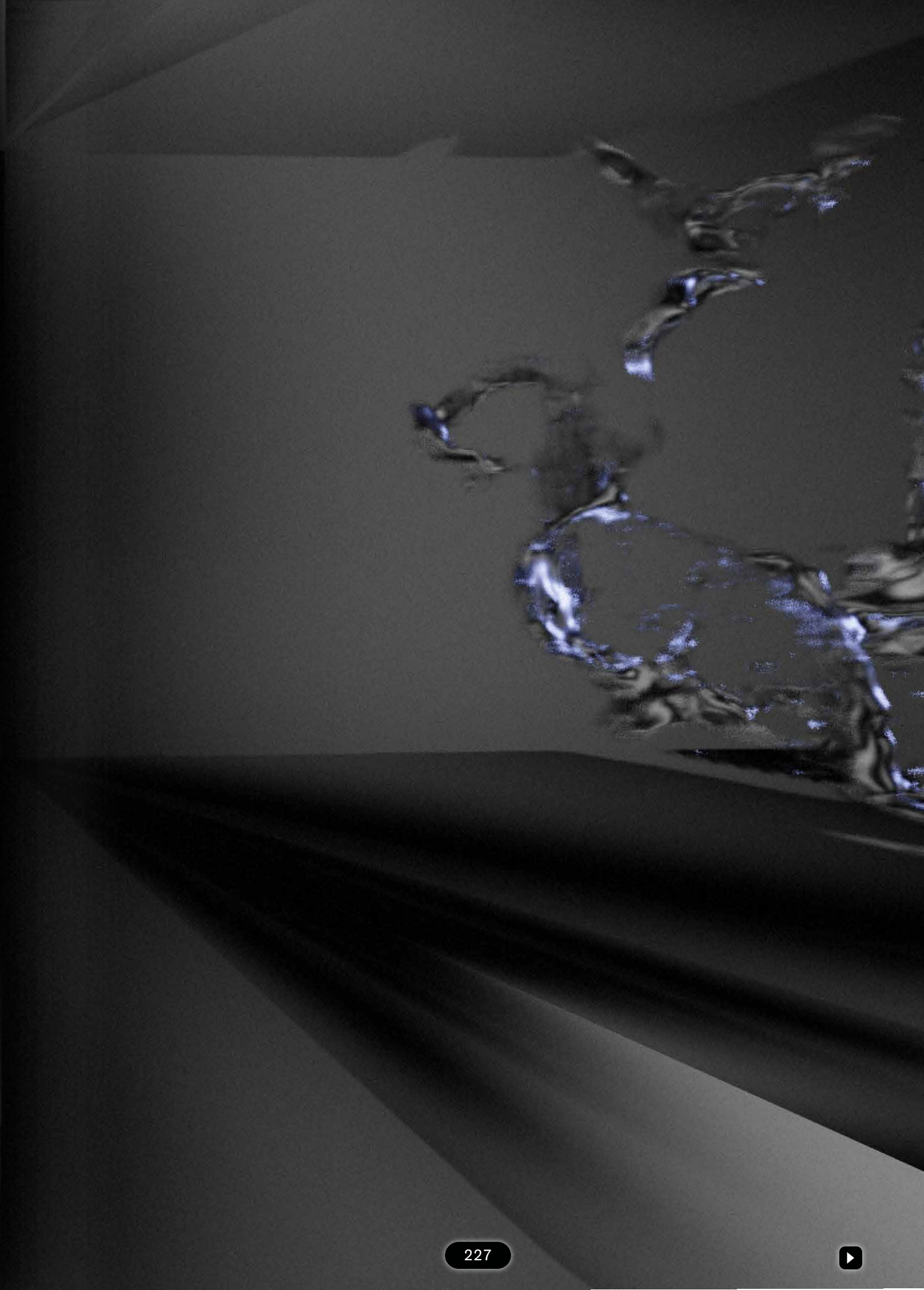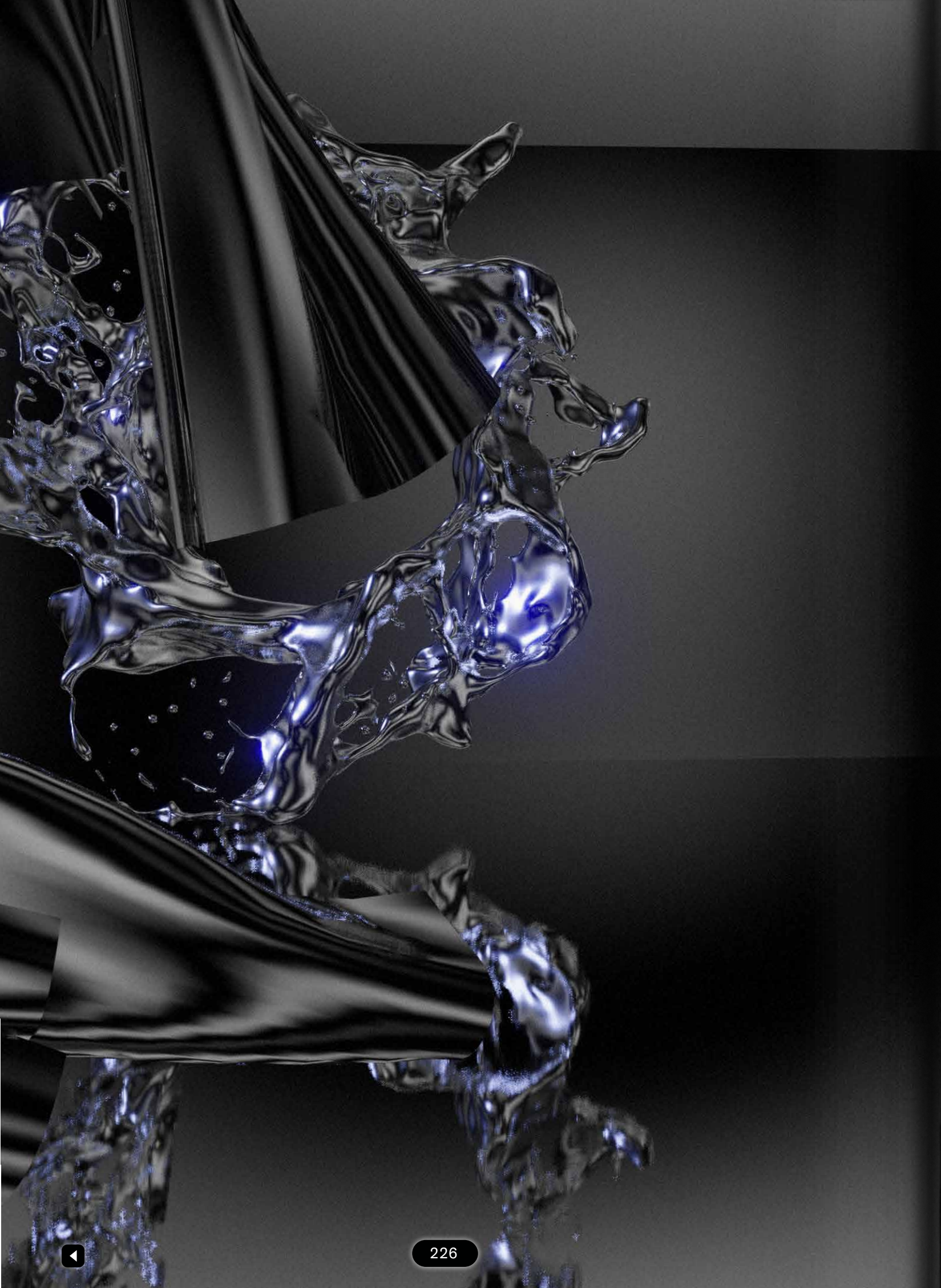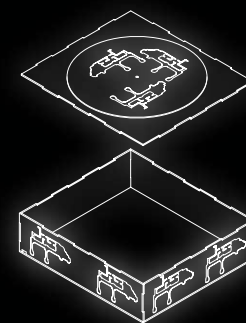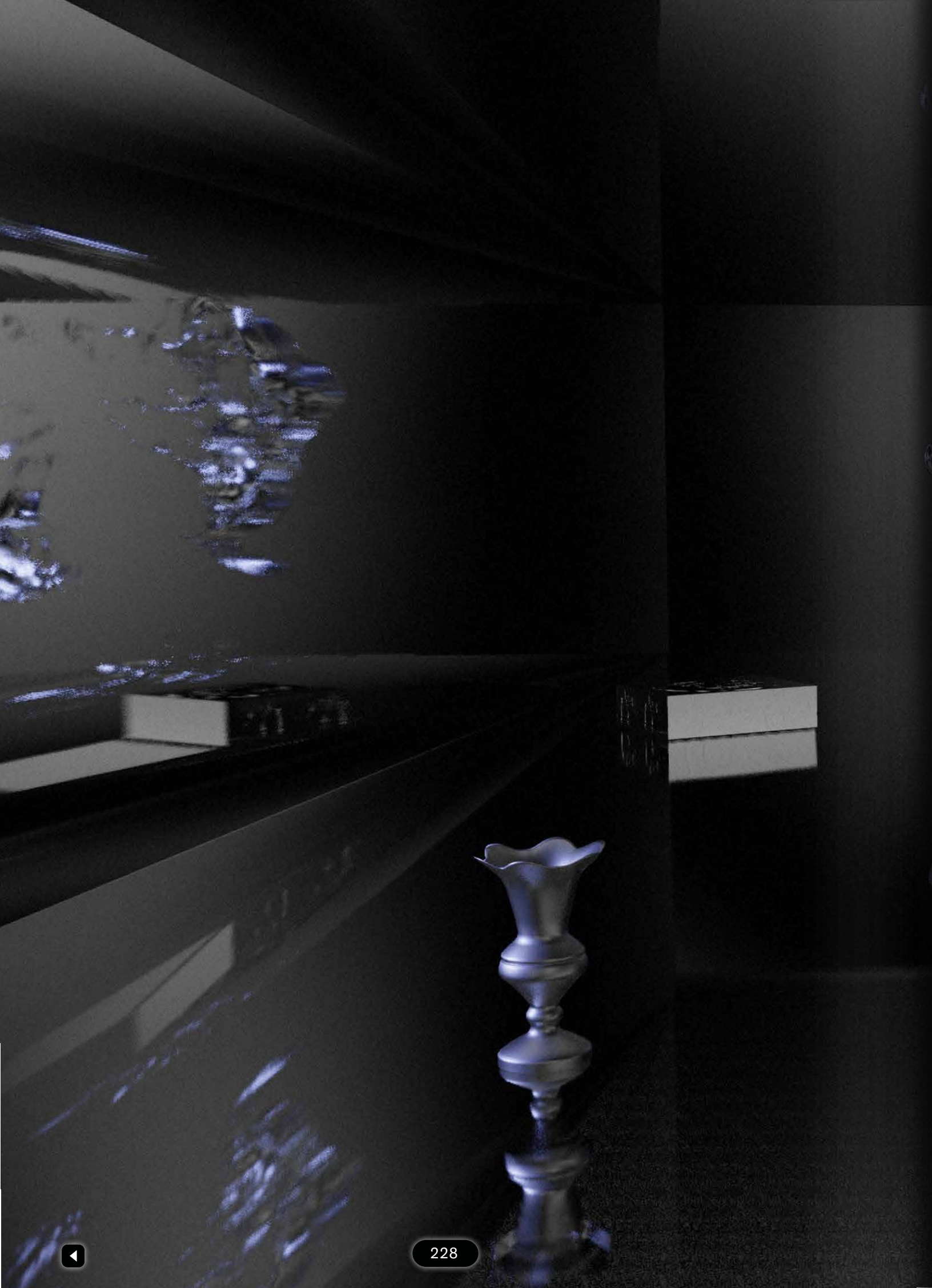
HEART SPACE TERRARIUM

OBJECT

2019

The *Heart-space Terrarium* is a record player that moves between the virtual and physical world. Inscribed on the sides of the record player are fragments of the ancient blueprint of this virtual garden. For this record player to "function" something must be given to it. The record player is situated on the ground and is meant to be experienced sitting down, being closer to the earth and in close communion with this object. It is your pulse, your heartbeat, that will make it come to life.

The physical version of *Heart-space Terrarium* is a hybrid between digital and analog technologies. An arduino pulse sensor that is placed on your wrist, transforms data from your heartbeat into the spinning of the record. The record player lights up with a glistening green light and starts to spin and plays sound.
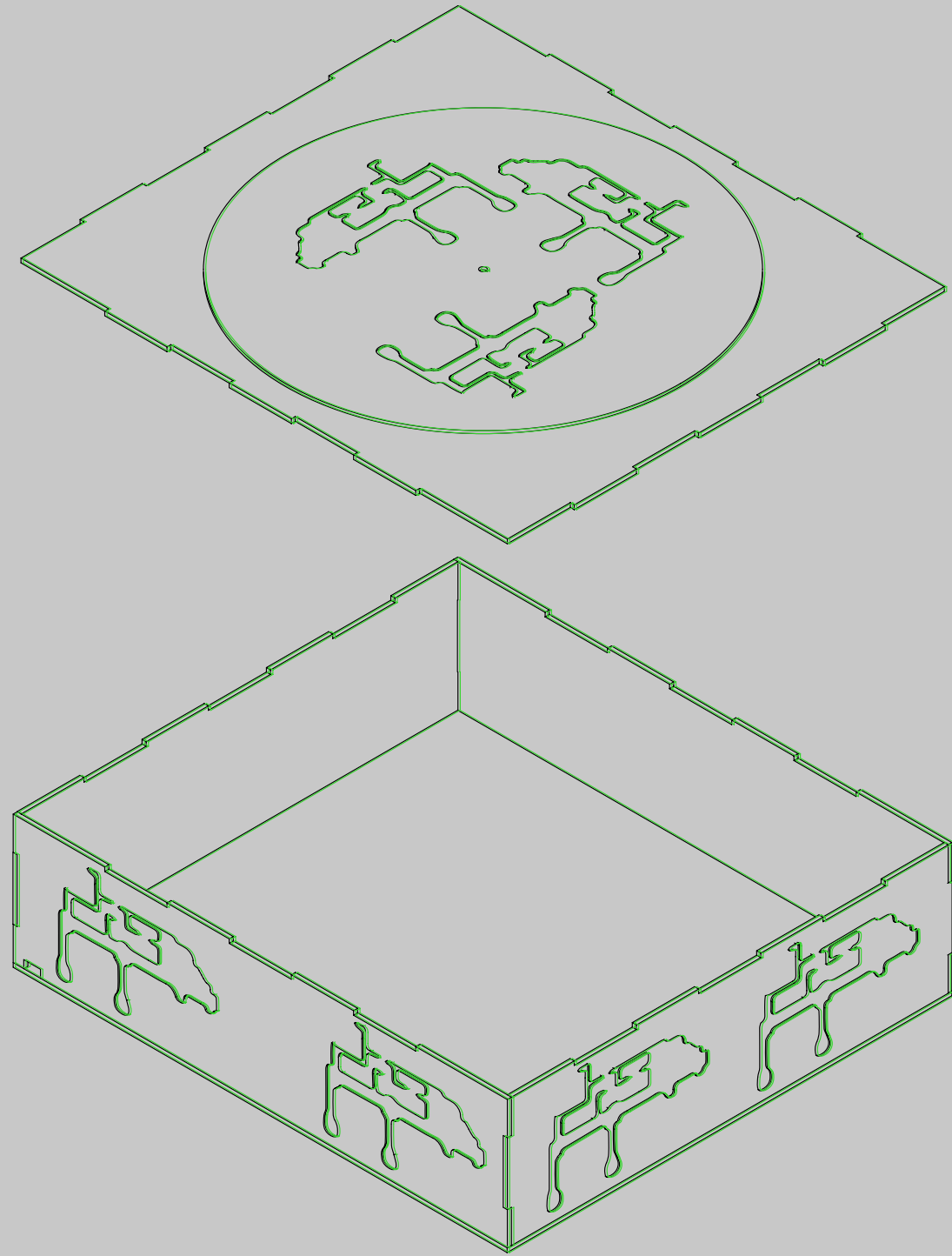
Isometric view of the *Heart-space Terrarium*

Arduino is placed inside the record player. Once the pulse sensor is activated, the *Heart-space Terrarium* lights up
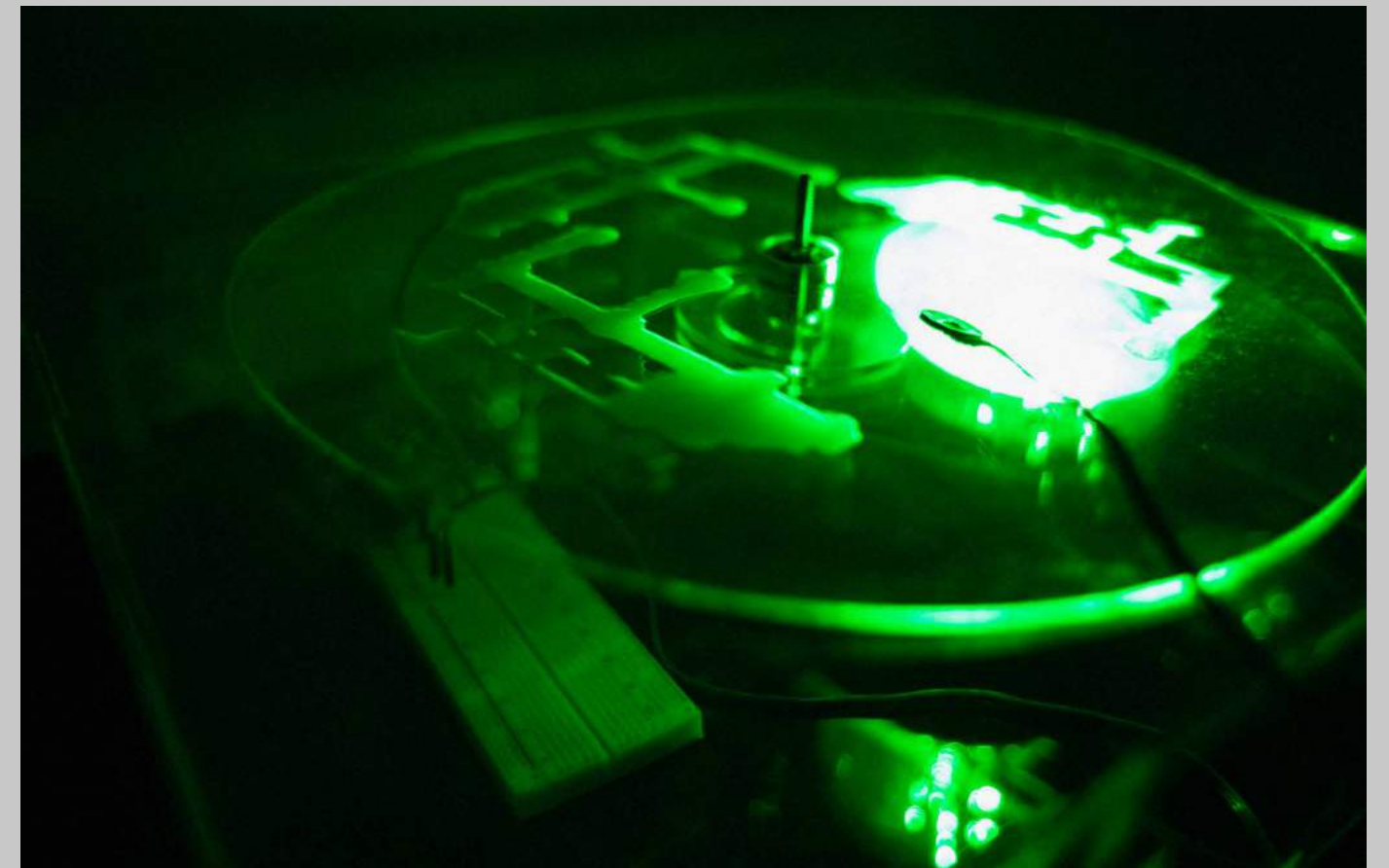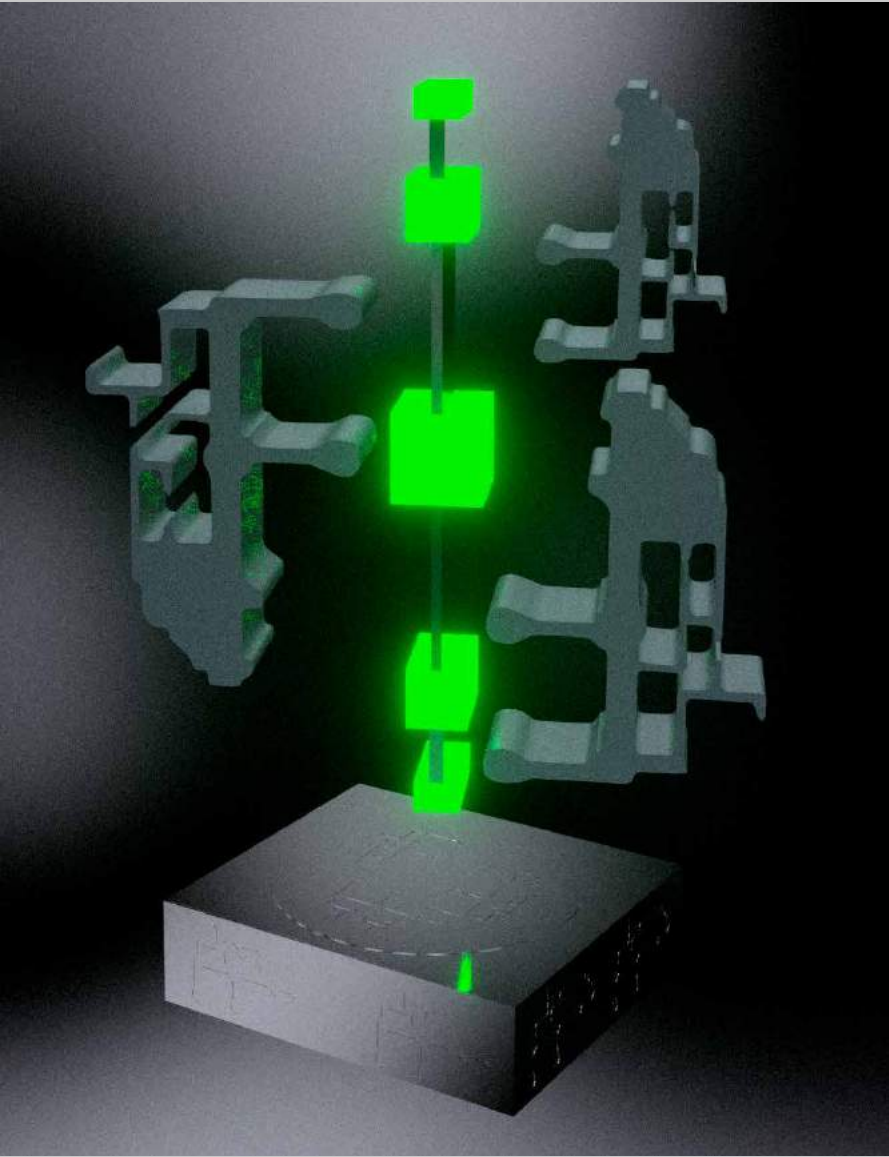
Virtual interpretation of the
Heart-space Terrarium
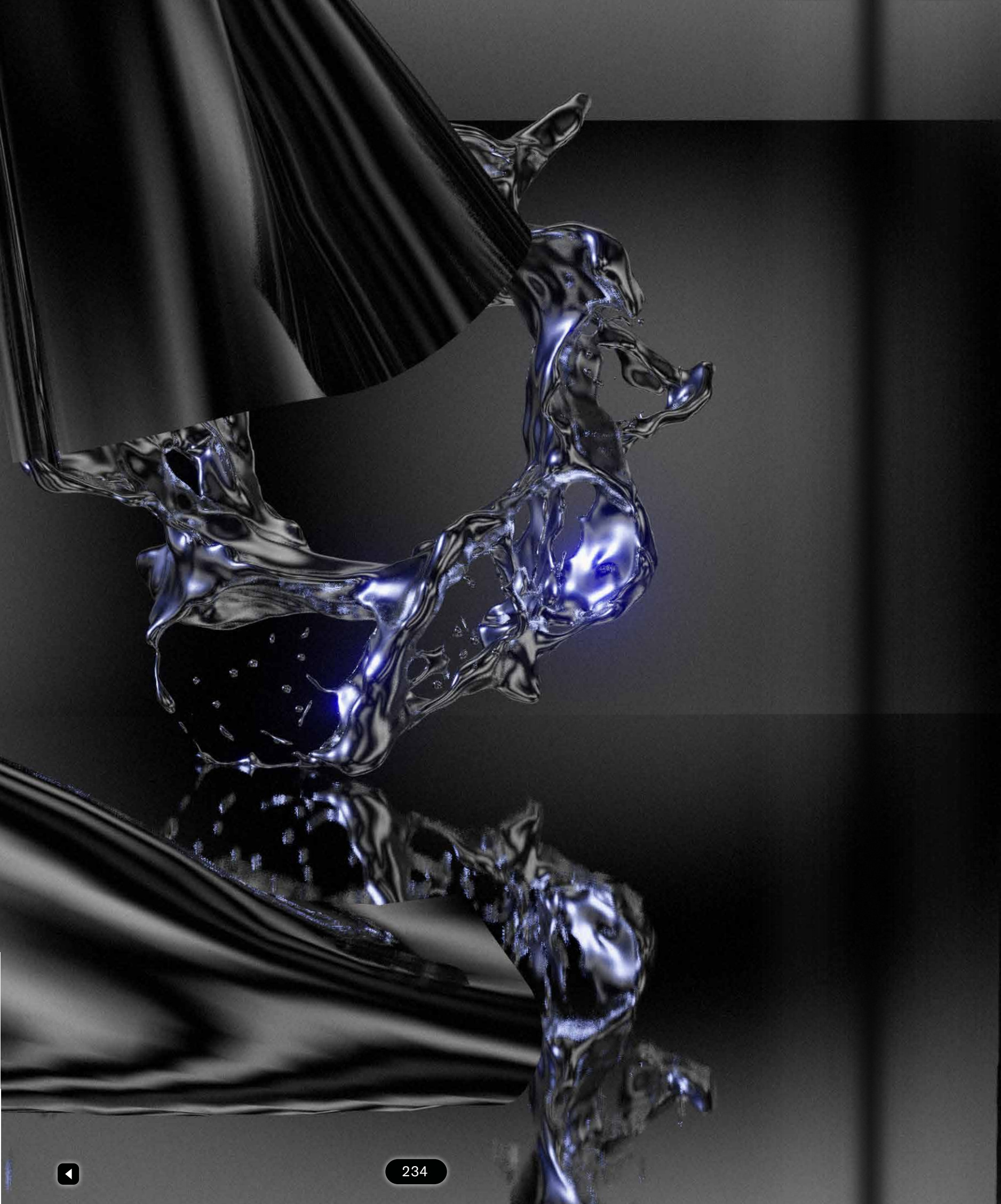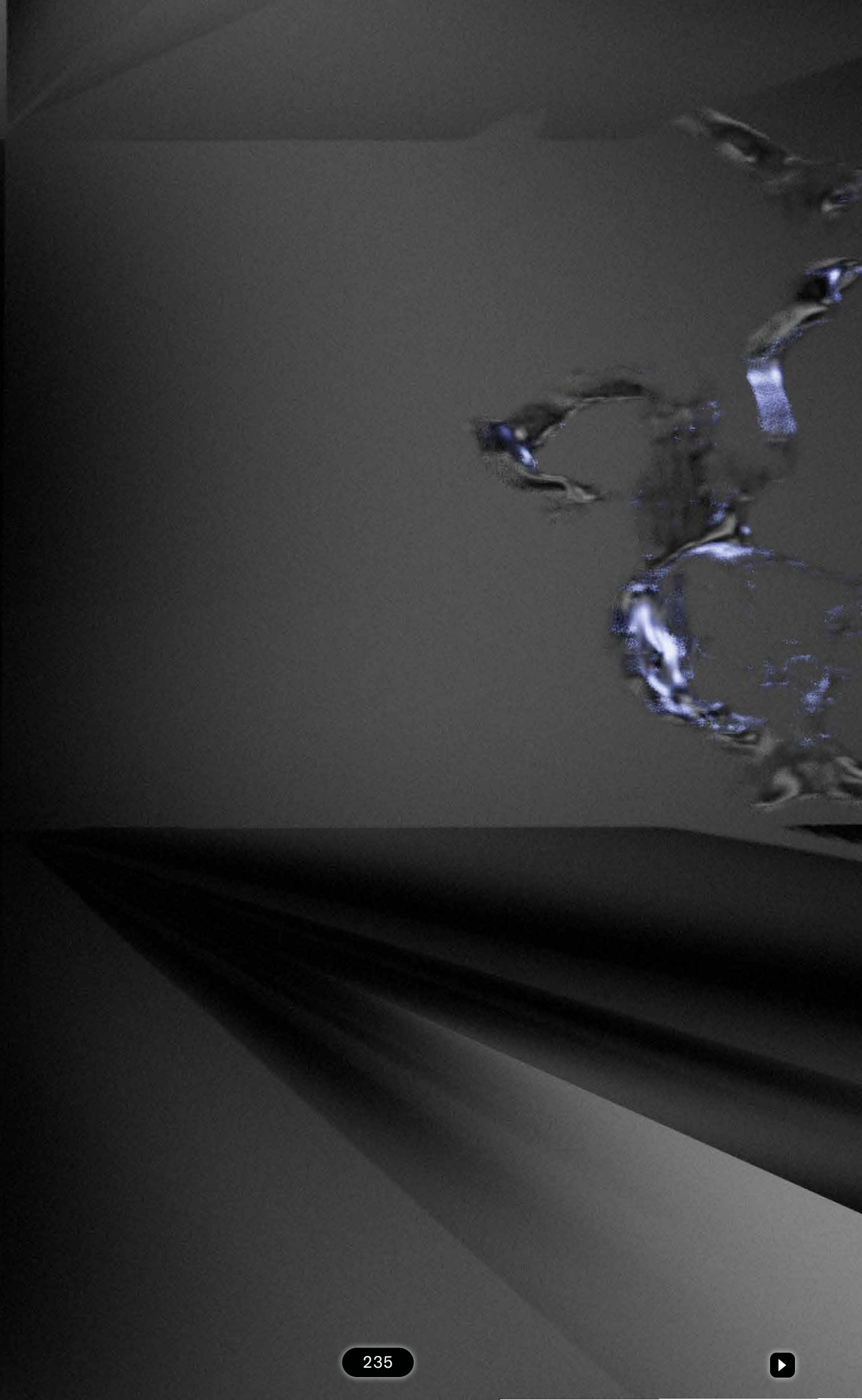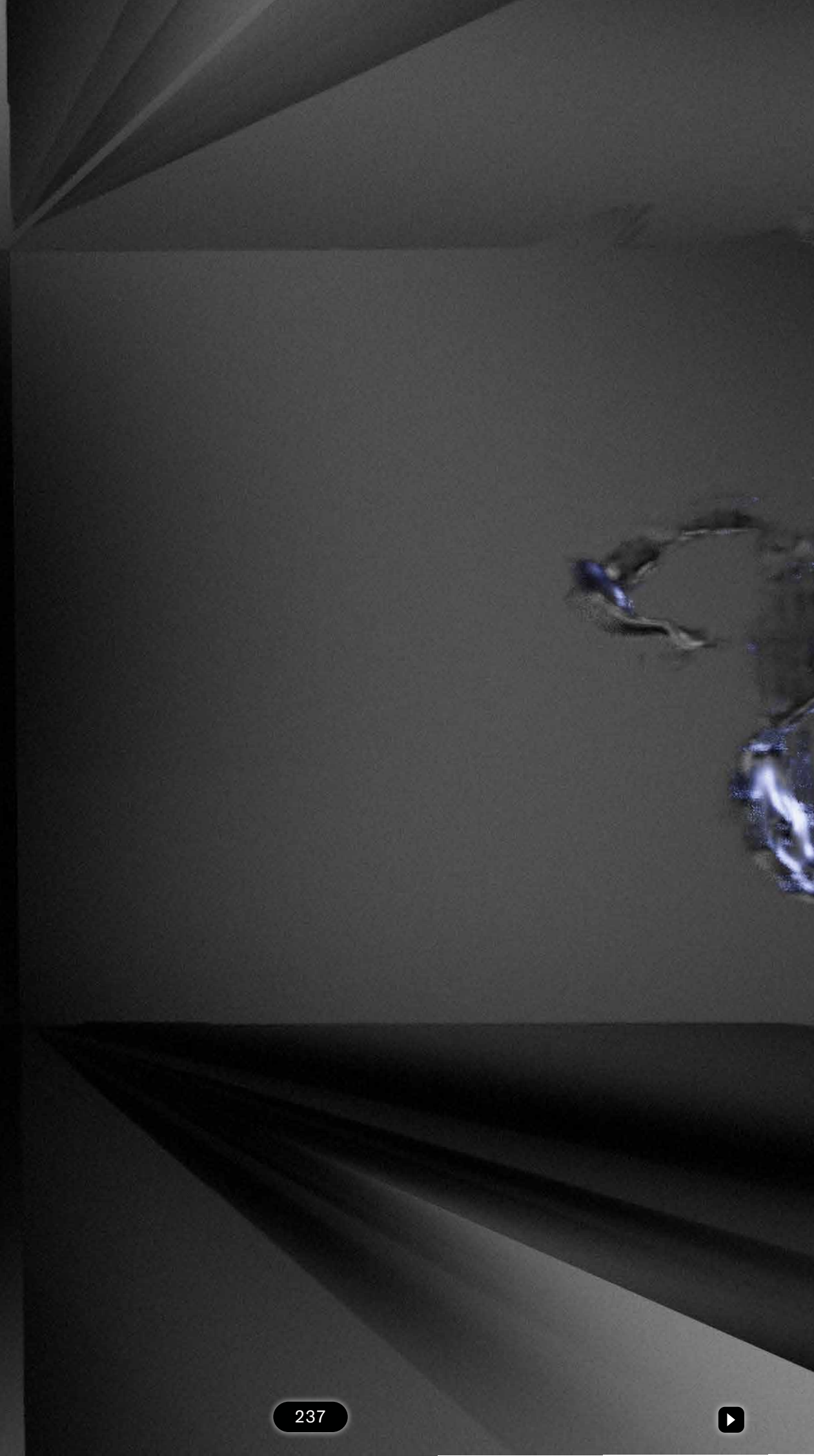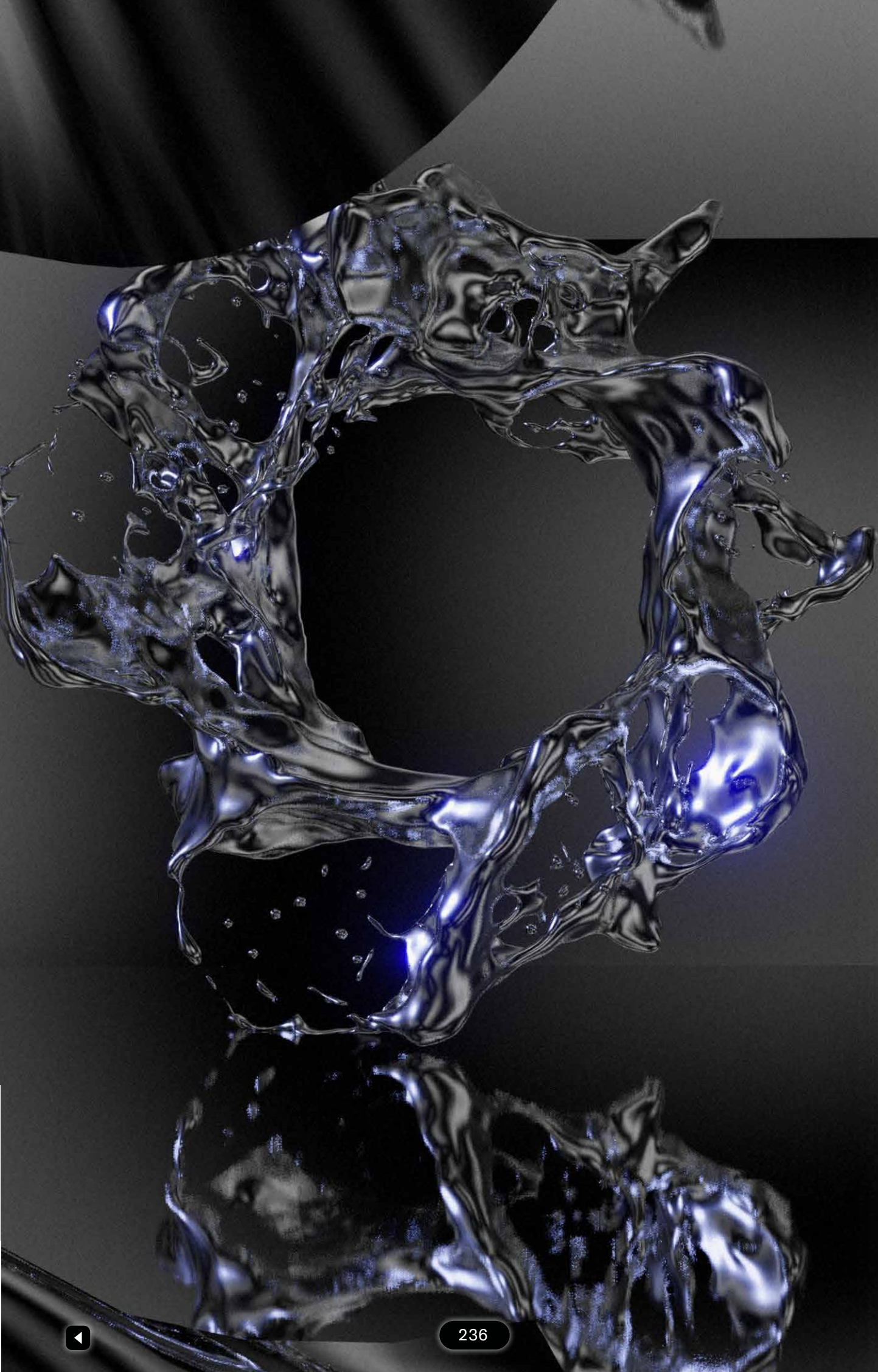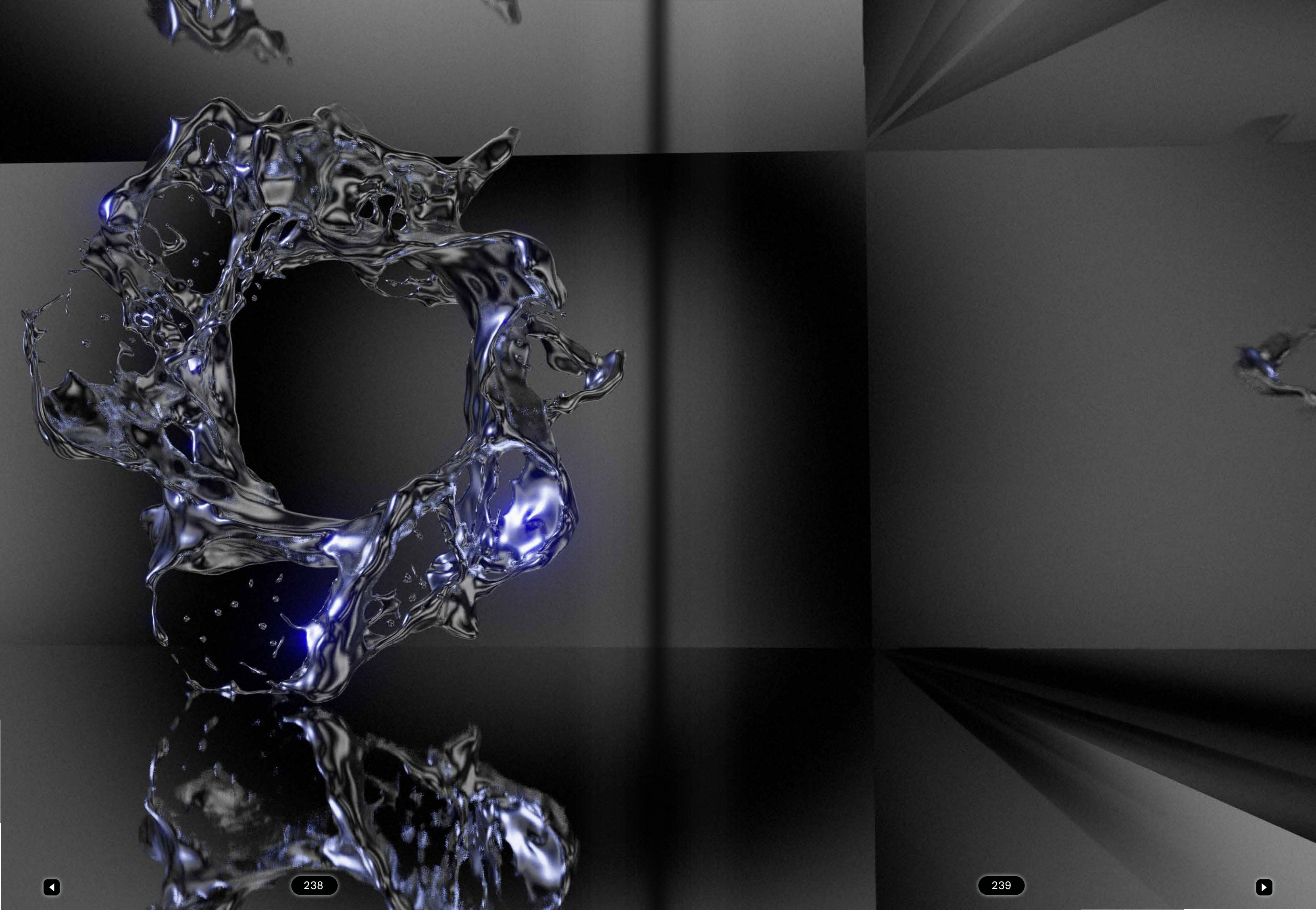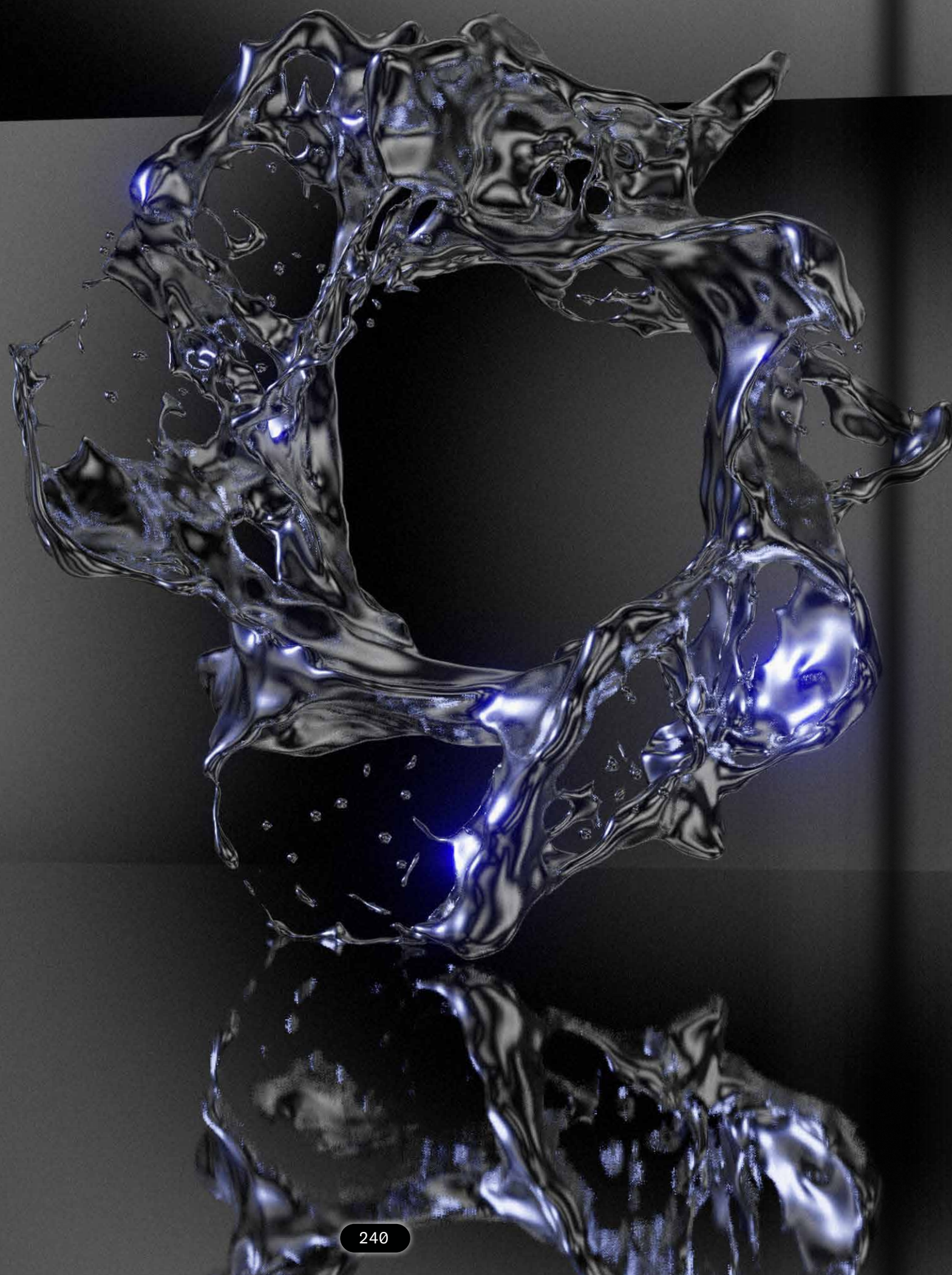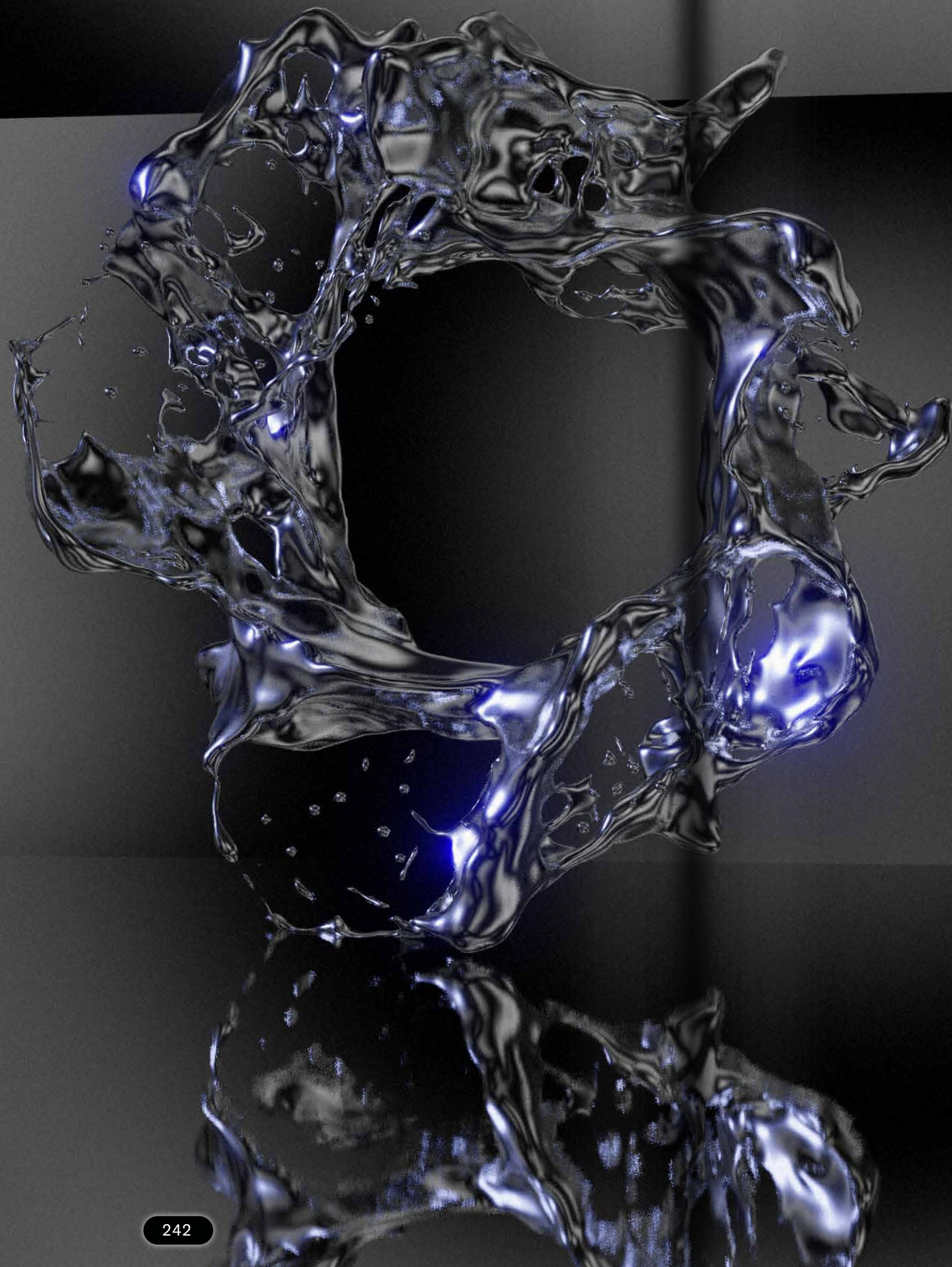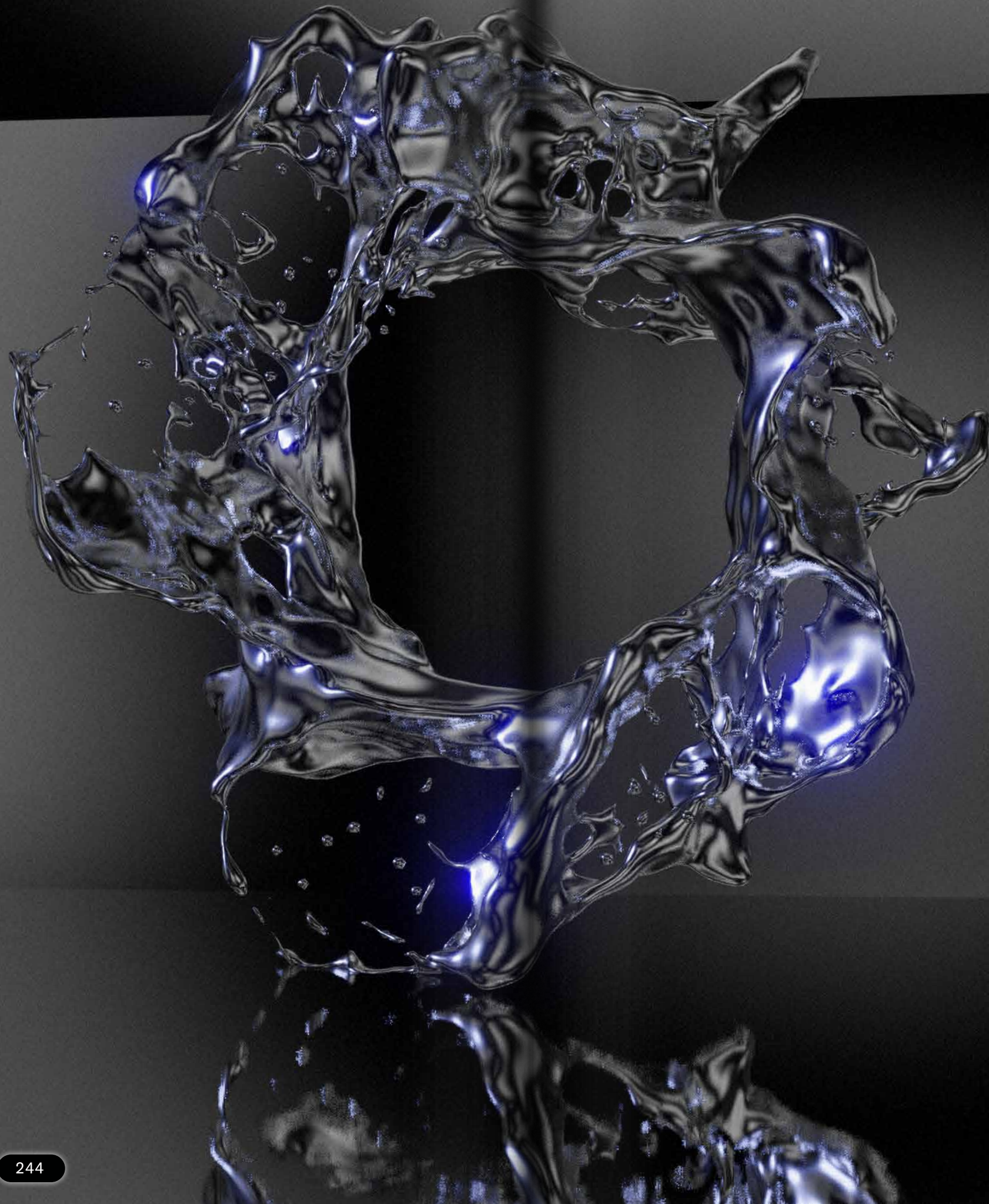
THE DOME
OF BIRDS

The Dome of Birds is dedicated to the ancient Persian poem *Conference of the Birds* by Sufi mystic poet Attar of Nishapur. This poem is an allegory about turning inward and finding your truth. Words from the poem can be read on the surface of the dome. Moving through this space you can hear bird calls echoing. Each alien shape represents a different bird — the nightingale, the hoopoe, and the blackbird amongst others. The closer you move towards one, the bird call starts to sing. Here you experience the mystical and the sublime, further connecting with nature. The dome becomes an archive of bird calls for the visitors of the future.
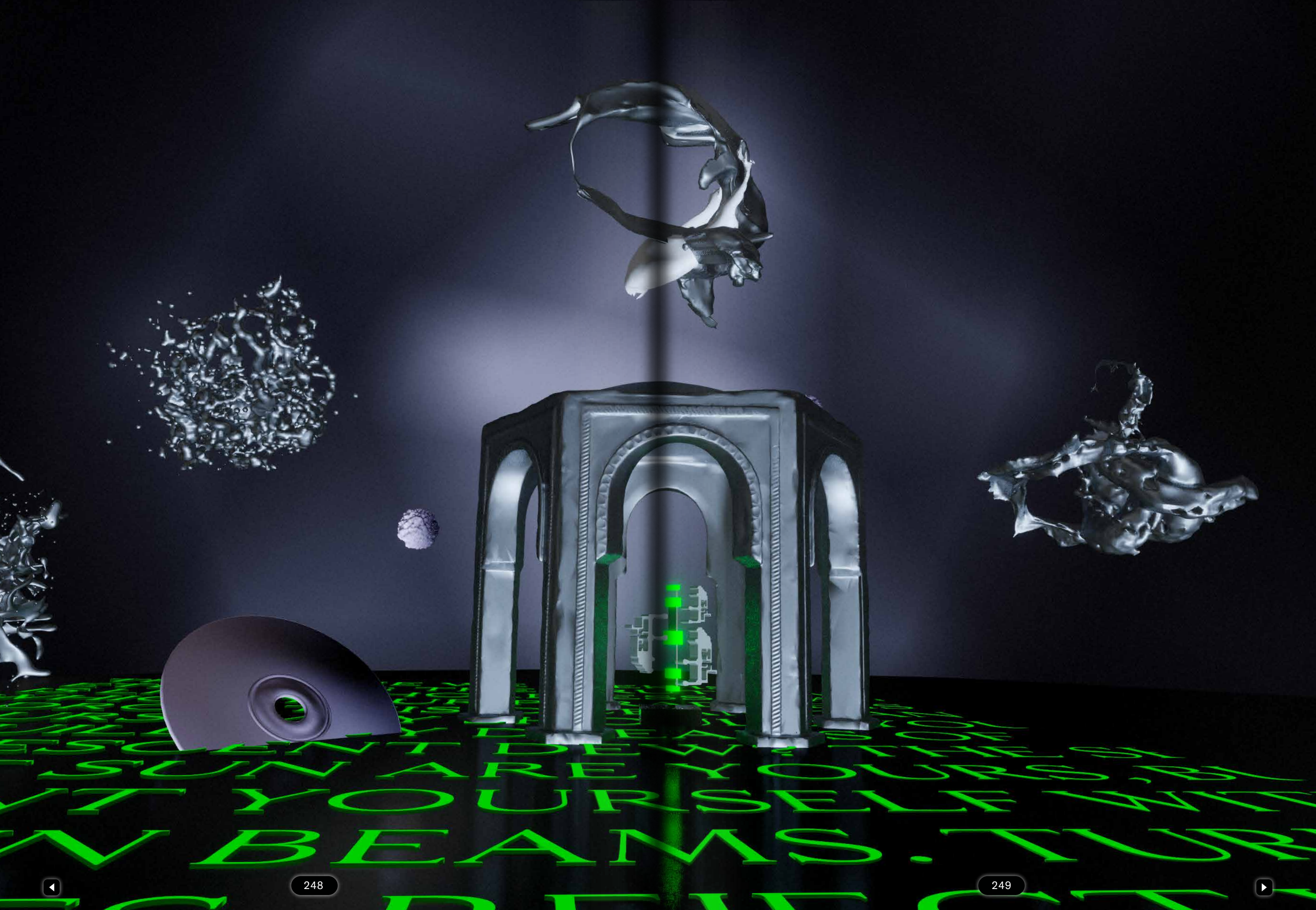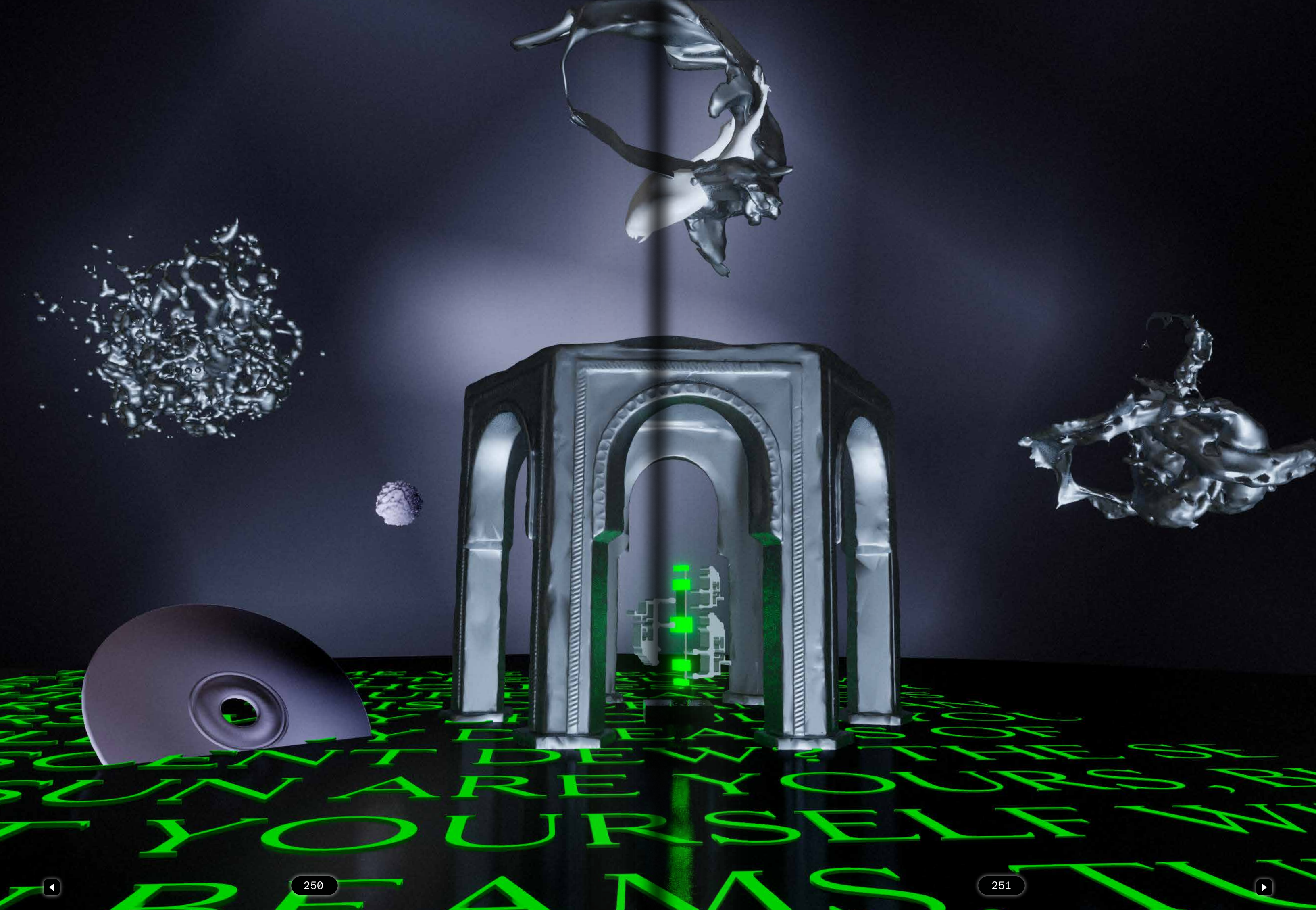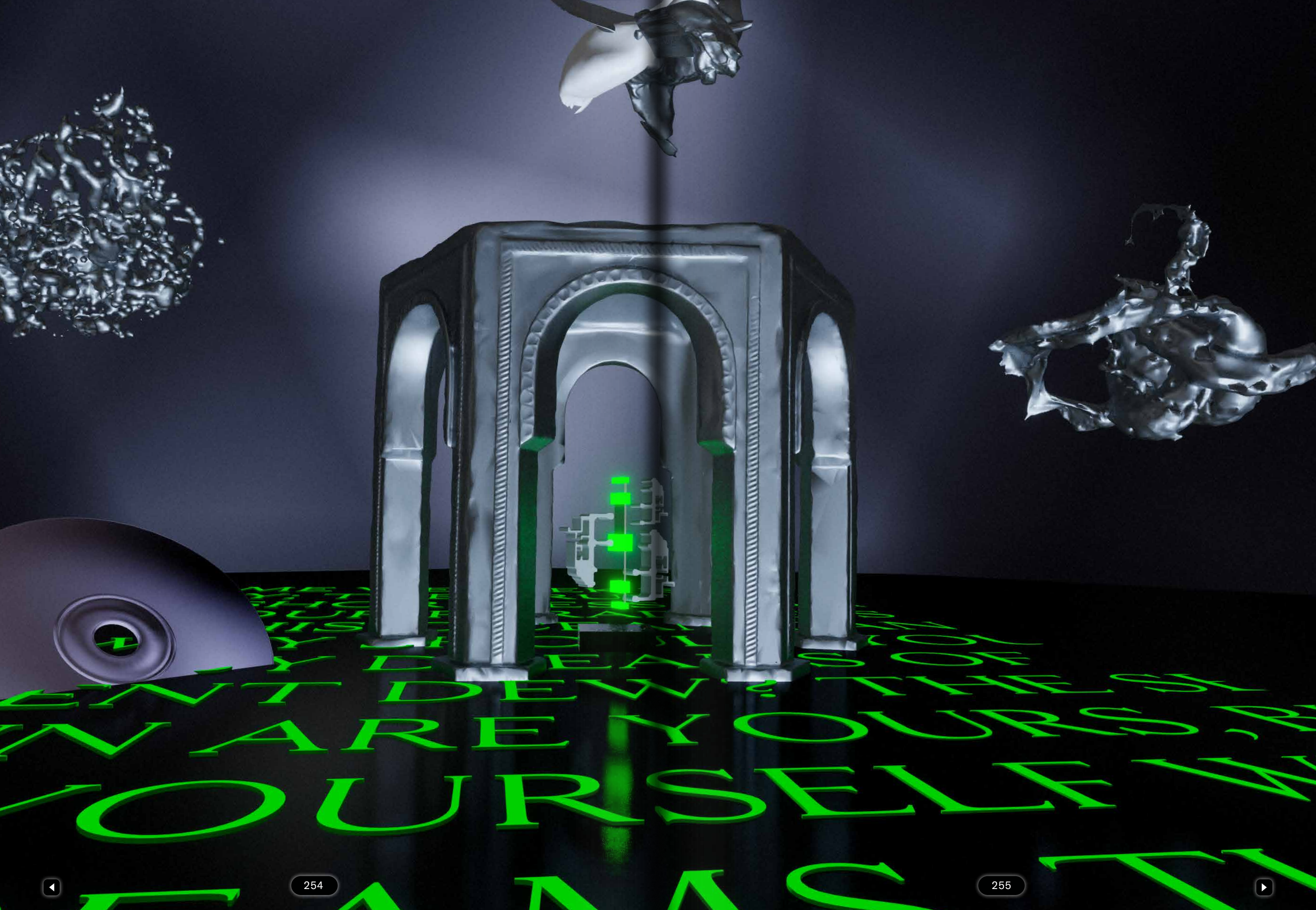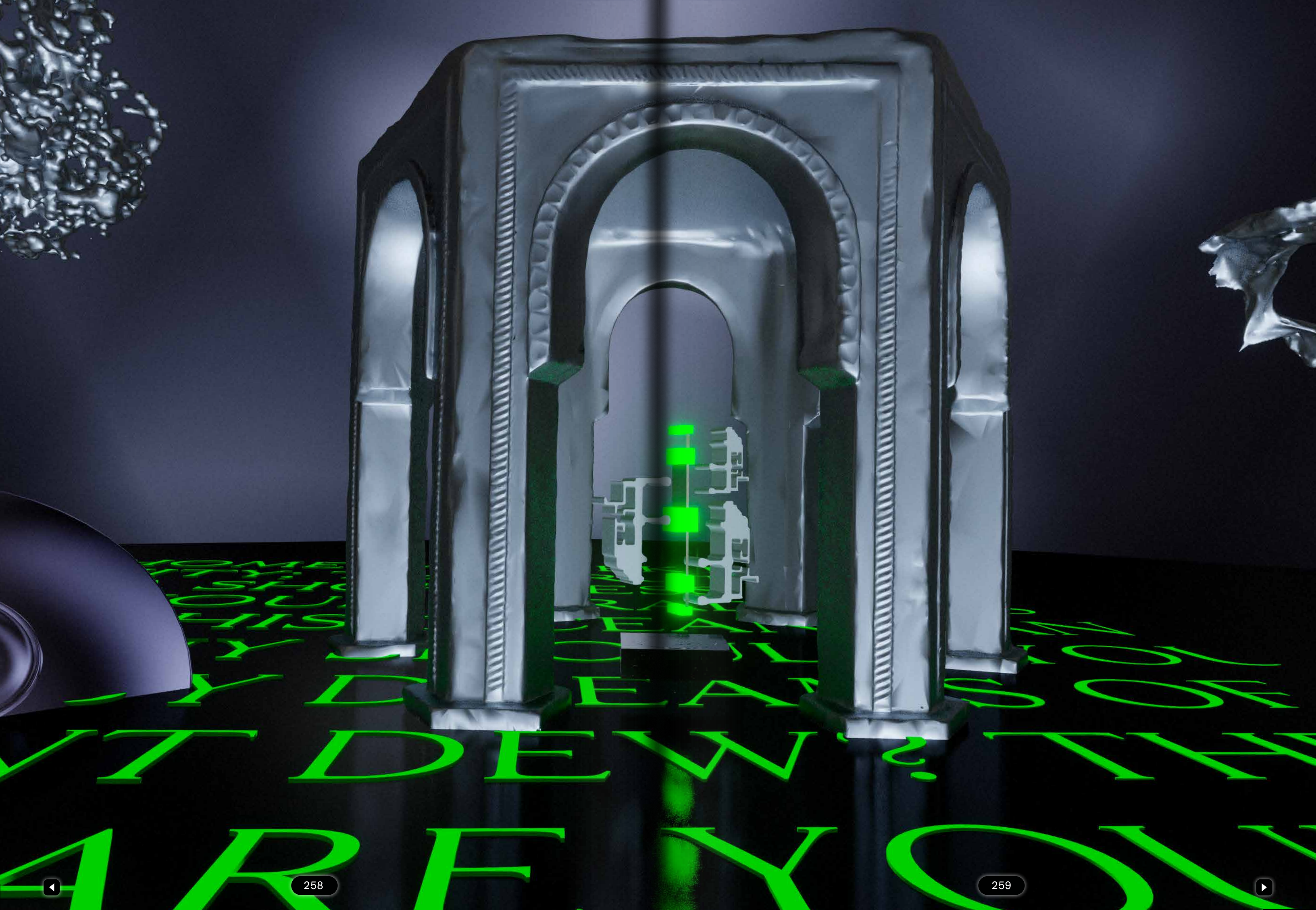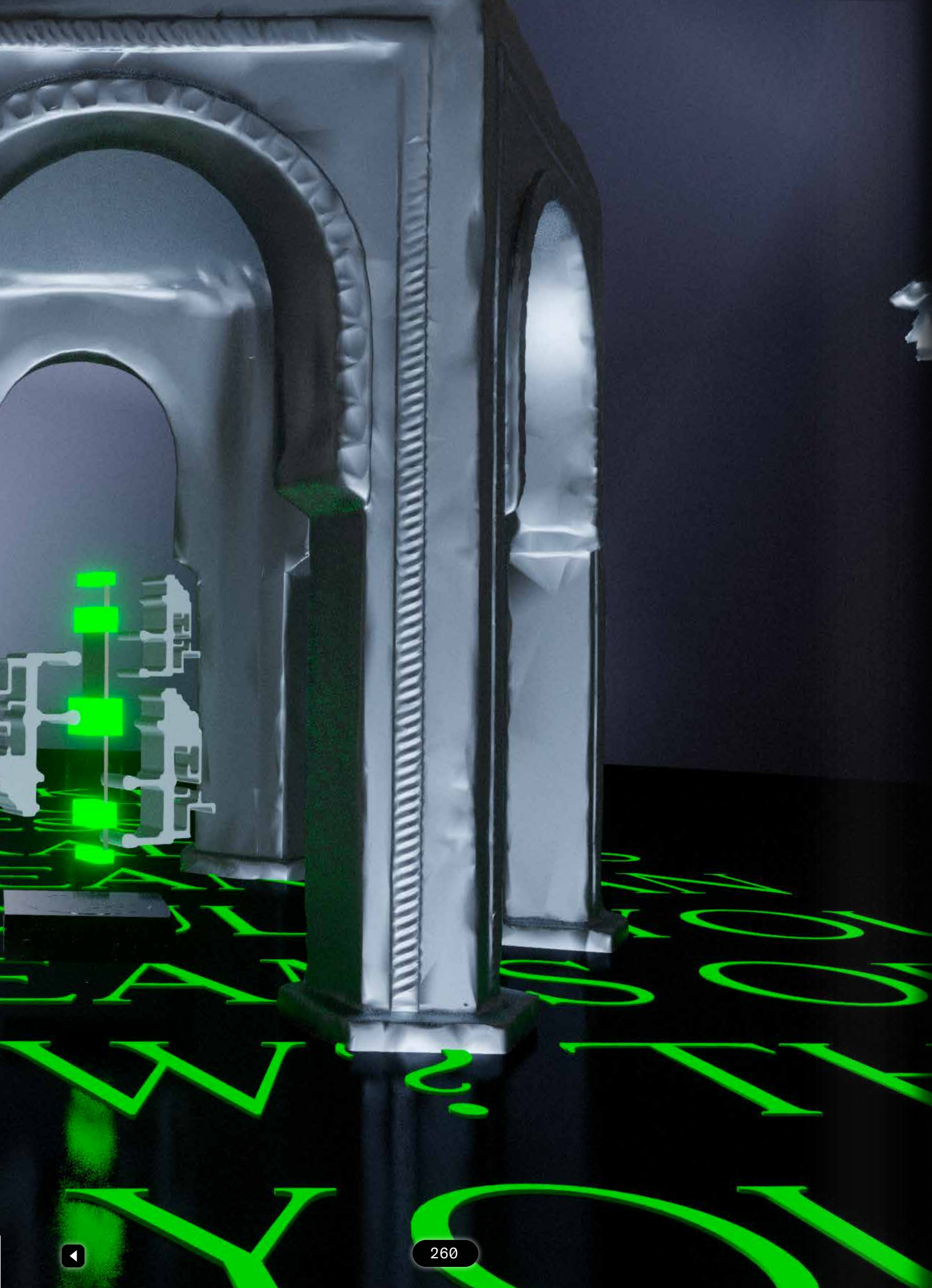
REMEMORY ROOM

VR WEBSITE

2019

What is a collective memory of the natural world? What is the sorrowful act of archiving before extinction? I wanted to create an archive of people's lived experiences with nature and situate them in a virtual space. The result is a website with memory rooms where you can enter to experience the simulation of a tree, the ocean and a glacier. As a result, a speculative archive emerges.

This speculative project exists as a VR website, where users are asked to submit their anonymous memories which then become part of an archive of collective memories of the natural earth. Within the *Rememory Room* there are several spaces (pages) where users can enter to experience simulations of a tree, the ocean and rain. An email is also sent to the user with their memory, so that specific memory can live forever within the cloud of their own archives as well.

Landing page for the
Rememory Room website.
Once in this space you
can navigate to the three
different memory rooms.

REMEMORY
ROOM

REVEMORY ROOM

Inside a memory room page, a window appears asking users to submit a memory and their email.

⌄
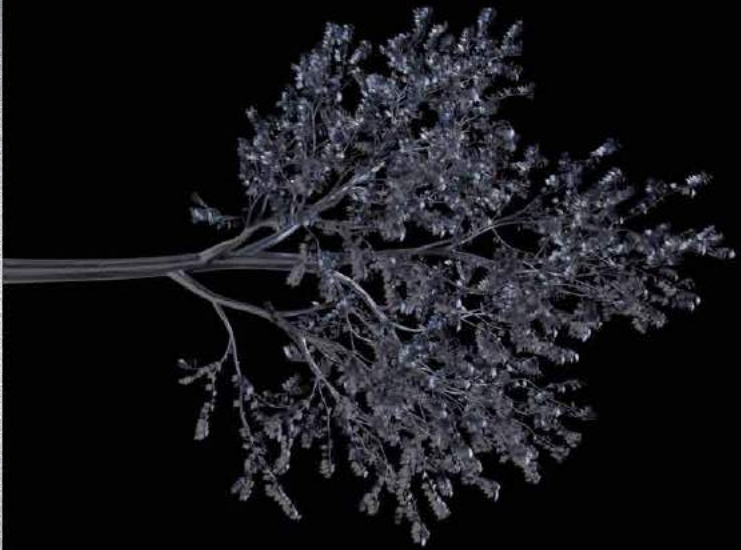
TELL ME A MEMORY OF A TREE

I remember by the highway there was this vast field

EMAIL

SUBMIT

0000314

9.10.19

I remember we were in the North of Iran and we stopped by the side of the road. I remember this vast land filled with cherry blossom trees. I was maybe 4 or 5 years old. My mother tells me this is most likely not my memory, and that I saw this in an old photograph, but I vividly remember the moment she picked me up and lifted me so I could touch the flowers on the branch. The trees were pink and had a strong aroma of sun and rose.

0000314

10.12.19

I remember we had this berry tree in the backyard when I was a child! I was maybe 9 or 10 years old and I would climb all the way to the highest branch and sit there in the afternoons. It was the most beautiful spot to sit and read and escape from the world.

0000314

11.12.19

In the middle of summer mulberrys are ready, big white sweet and delicate to be picked one by one so when the day comes, when my father says they are ready, the whole family goes under the tree and my mom brings a big clean sheet and everybody grabs one of the corner of the sheet.Then my father start shaking the tree and delicious mulberries are pouring from the tree onto the sheet.

The memory that is submitted becomes part of the website collective archive. An email will also be sent with the submitted memory to users inbox.

TELL ME A MEMORY OF THE OCEAN

I remember the first time I went to the Caspian|

EMAIL

SUBMIT

0000318

9.25.19

I remember spending hours in the water in Goa in the summer... a few close friends and I used to go almost as a ritual every year during the summer when I was in India. I always had the feeling of being completely at peace with myself when I'm in the water. I used to love going into the water by myself while I could see my friends on the beach at a distance. Alone but never lonely.

0000318

9.30.19

I saw the ocean for the first time in Peggy's Cove, in Halifax Nova Scotia. It felt like the ocean was so alive, it was this big entity that seemed so deep and vast. I was afraid because I couldn't see the bottom of it. It felt almost hypnotizing. The ocean feels like a whole other world within our world.

0000318

10.30.19

I have this memory of walking on the beach at night, that one summer. It wasn't meant to be, but in that moment it was true. It still is, it just didn't last. I remember the moonlight so distinctly, shining off the water...glistening...the water so still and heavy, but the air so light and breezy.

0000318

10.30.19

I remember when I was a kid, I was very specific on how I should be dressed to go to the beach: bathing suit, flipflops and a hat (as a compromise with my mom for not wearing a dress). I would lead my family to the beach scream every two seconds "here?" until they find their perfect sitting spot. Then I just toss my accessories and rush to meet my beautiful ocean and be one with the water.
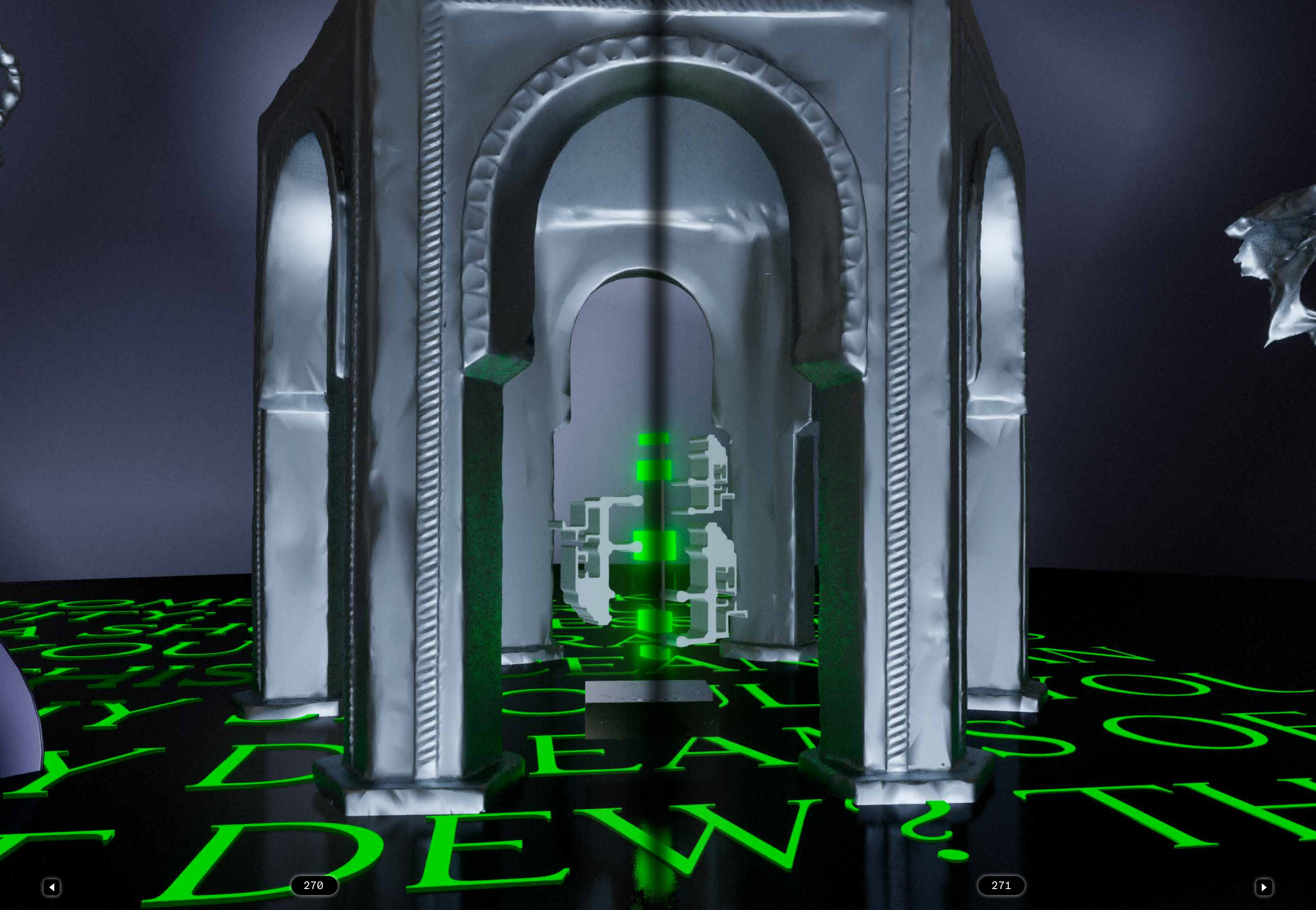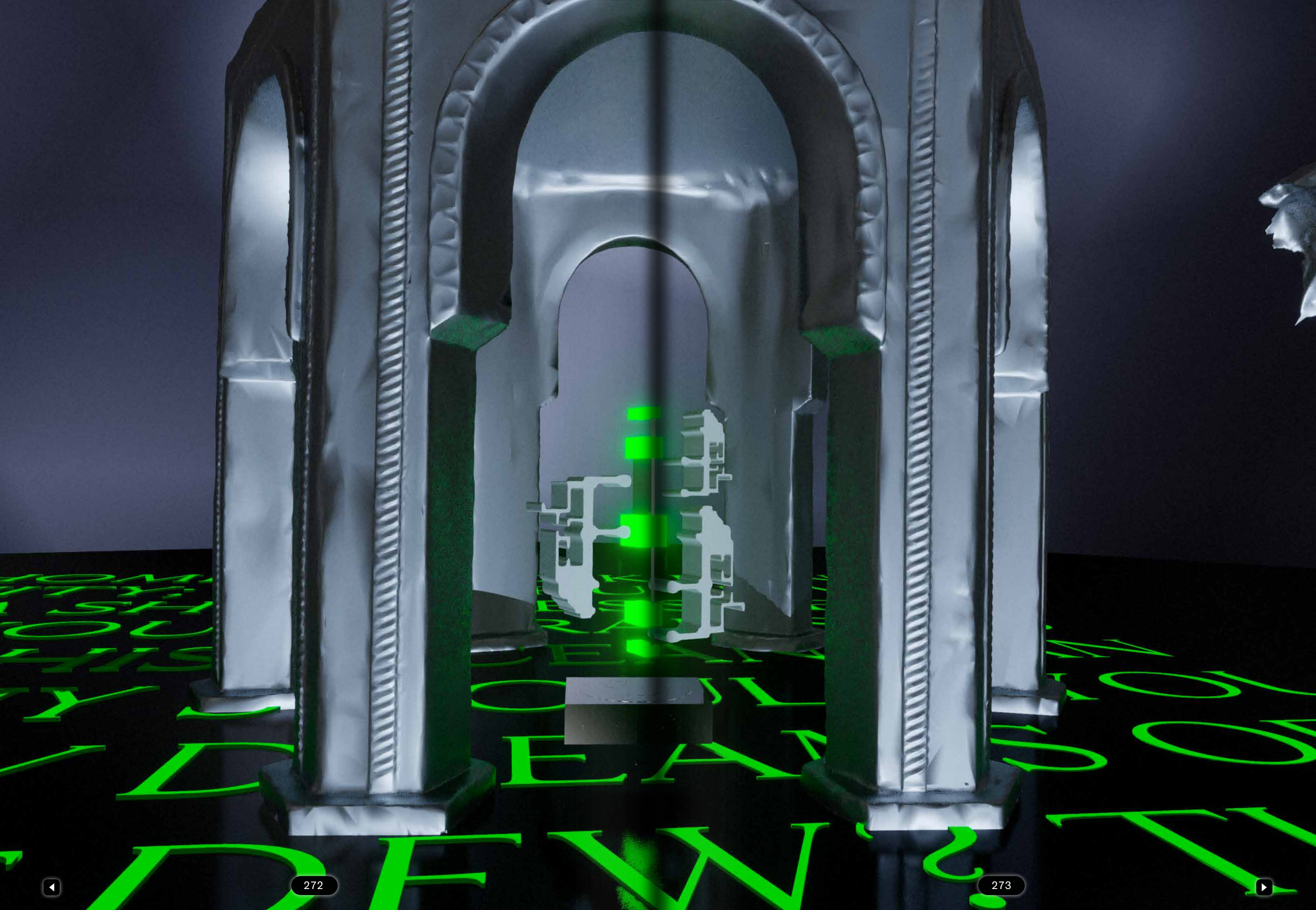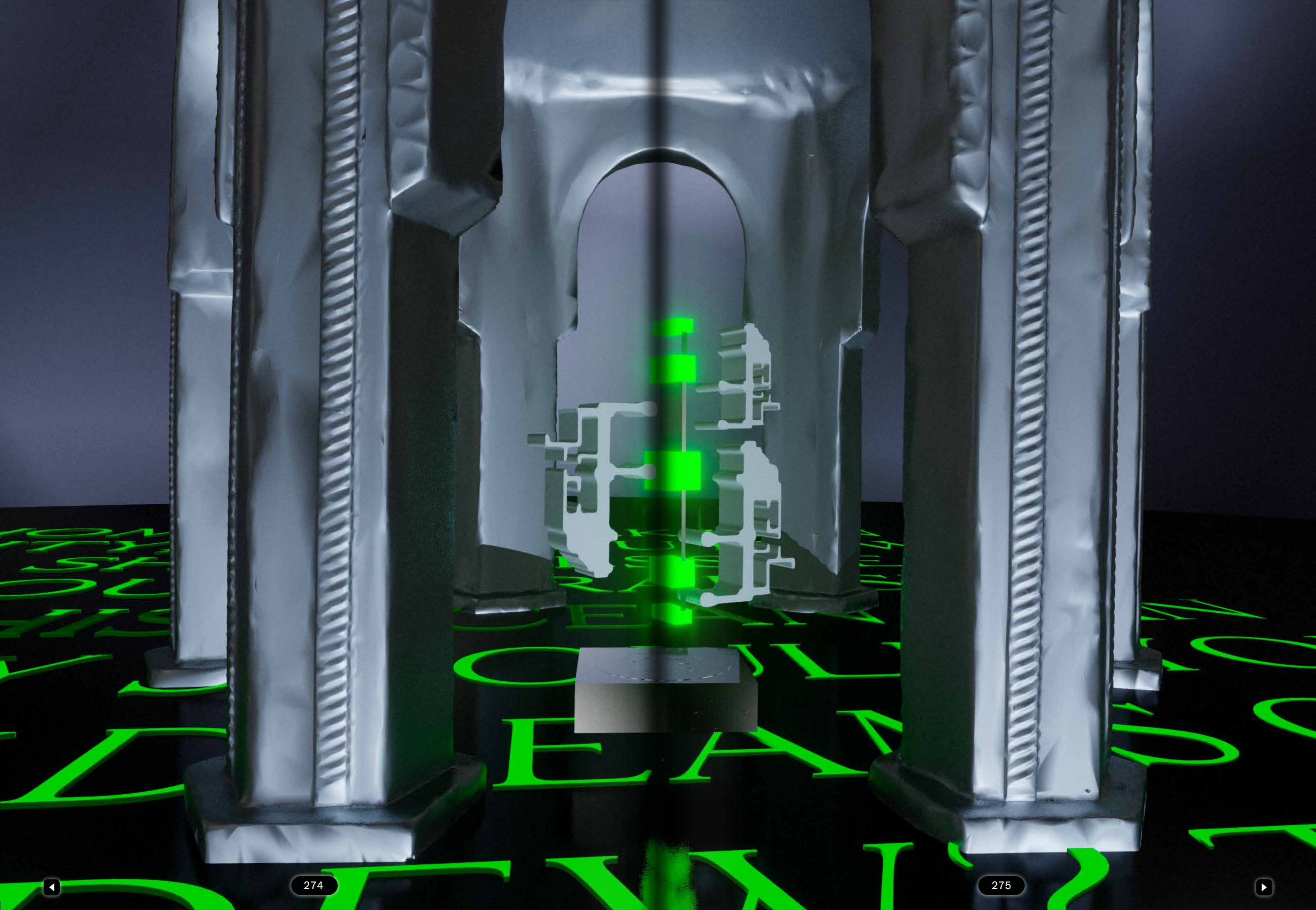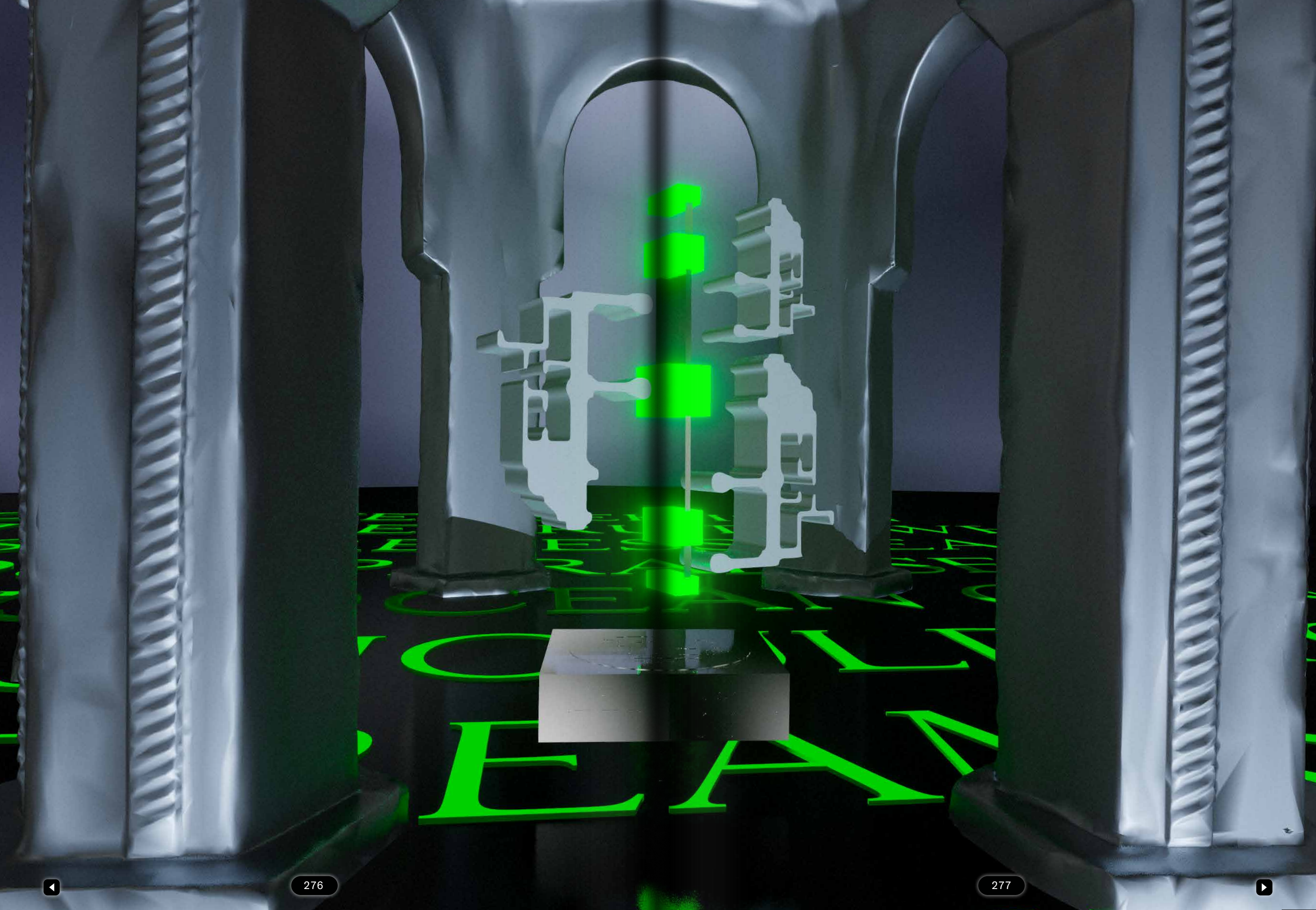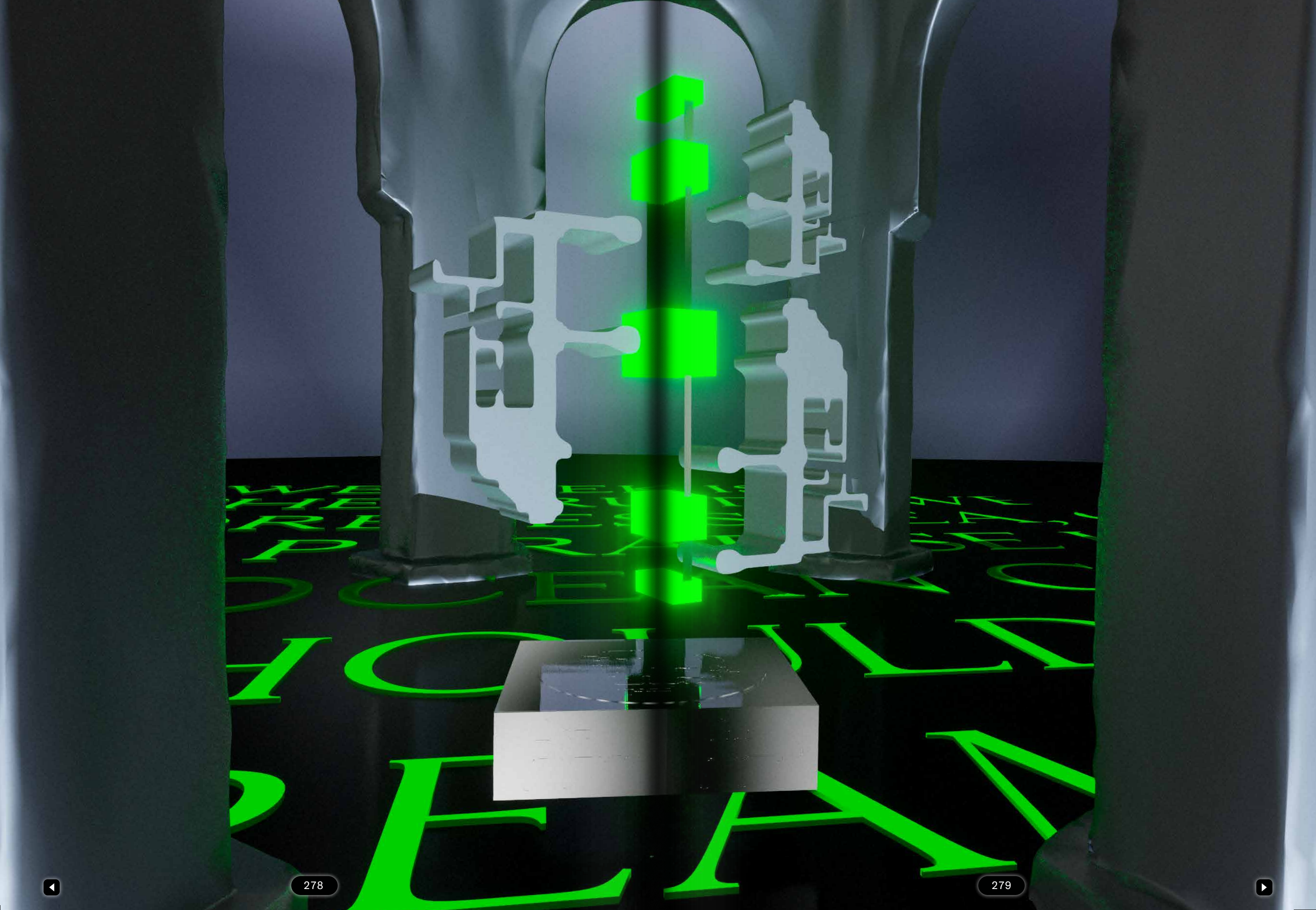
JAKOB KUDSK STEENSEN

The Deep Listener, Jakob Kudsk
Steensen, 2019

Jakob Kudsk Steensen is a Danish artist and art director based in New York City. He is concerned with how imagination, technology and ecology intertwine. In a practice that emphasizes field work and collaboration, Kudsk Steensen develops large-scale video and XR installations that invite viewers into new ecological realities. Key collaborators include Composer and Musical Director for the Philip Glass Ensemble Michael Riesman, Ornithologist and author Dr. Douglas H. Pratt, Architect Sir David Adjaye OBE RA, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the Natural History Museum London, among others.

SL

Hello Jakob! Thank you so much for agreeing to have an interview with me. I was very excited to discover your work, and the themes which you explore resonate with the inquiries I have with my thesis right now'—the notion of using the virtual space as a way to re-imagine/re-engage with the past. VR as a way to slow down time and enter a meditative state.

How did you first find your way to VR and what drew you to start creating in this space?

JS

I modified video games growing up and as an adult in my artistic practice. VR appealed to me because it allowed me to develop interactive, ambitious virtual landscapes for wide and public audiences. Before VR, it was very complicated to create artworks virtually, which worked well for non-game audiences. VR allowed me to show the intellectual and artistic capabilities of virtual media to new audiences and curators.

SL

As in many of your works, your piece *Deep Listener* is an immersive audio-visual experience where the natural, physical world meets the virtual. Viewers are taken on an augmented reality sci-fi-geographical journey into the flora, fauna and landscaping of Hyde Park. I find it interesting that this project reframes the idea of a phone as a means of escaping our surroundings, and asking viewers to slow down and become more hyper-aware of our present surroundings. Can you speak about this notion of using AR to subvert our view of technology as opposed to nature, exploring the intrinsic relationship that can eo-exist between the two.

JS

AR and VR to me are not media we see in front of us, but devices we can use to connect to emotions, sensations and natural histories in reality. AR can exchange our senses and awareness of a specific place, or allow us to imagine it in new ways. So rather than thinking of VR and AR as a "medium", I think of them as connectors. Connectors to histories and overlooked places and species.
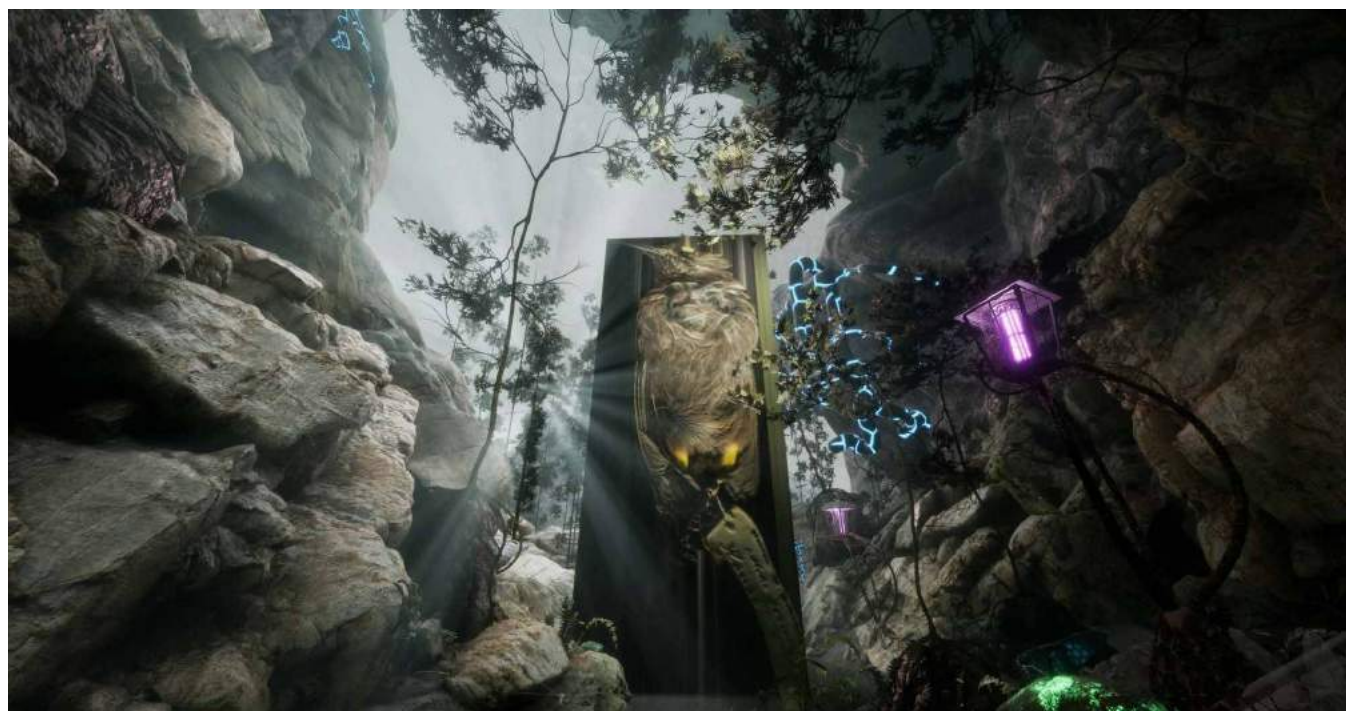
Re-Animated, Jakob Kudsk-Steensen, 2018

Re-Animated, Jakob Kudsk-Steensen, 2018

Your work in VR/AR shows the potential of technology to create a space of interaction between humans and magic, the immaterial becomes material. Do you see your work as having an element of magic and why is it important to create work which creates space for interaction with the immaterial?

"AR and VR to me are not media we see in front of us, but devices we can use to connect to emotions, sensations and natural histories in reality. AR can exchange our senses and awareness of a specific place, or allow us to imagine it in new ways."

There are two questions here. One deals with magic. For that, I can say that intuition and imagination are powerful tools I seek towards. Intuition to me, includes corporeal knowledge and learned sensory memories. When using VR and AR, I rely heavily on my own body, my physical knowledge of wind, water, sounds and organic textures, and how they make me feel. I draw on these to create virtual landscapes with emotional and sensory impact. I think this is where the magic enters. To me, working virtually feels like jamming in music. It is immediate. Vibrant. Dynamic and alive. Regarding interaction, it is something I have a complex relationship with. I try to not make people think about interactions, as click here, do that, move in

this way and x happens. Instead, I try to create intuitive designs. I seek for my audience to not think logically about how their movements in VR influence the virtual worlds. I want them to just feel it, explore it, sense it. I usually do not use conventional one-to-one interaction designs.

There is a sense of hyper-reality in your work. The shapes look organic but synthetic at the same time. What informs your visual aesthetic?

My aesthetics are informed directly from real physical sensations, which I enhance. If a leaf is supposed to feel weak I increase reflections and cooler colors by, perhaps, 25%, or something like that. Again, it comes down to intuitive knowledge where I seek to make virtual scenes feel warm, cold, hot, welcoming, alien or hostile.

Many of your works exist at the intersection of ecology and technology. Where did your interest in ecology emerge from and what was your process intermixing it with technology?

I grew up in a small town of 2,000 people by the coast in Denmark, and I went to a Steiner kindergarten. Immersion into landscapes is something I grew up with. As an artist now, I intentionally plan several months a year to specific landscapes. This fuels my digital art.

You have worked with biologists and ethnographers and sound artists. What is the collaborative process like for you?

A collaboration can take many forms. Mostly, I seek new perspectives on human relationships to different species or landscapes, or I look for challenging, new and exciting perspectives in nature, which we can learn from.

SL

Your VR work *RE-ANIMATED* is based on the last "Kaua'i 'ō'ō" bird. I was so excited to learn about this project because I also used the Kaua'i 'ō'ō" bird sound in one of my thesis pieces. There's something equally beautiful and haunting about the sound, it summons feelings of a deep past. What first drew you to the sound of the Kaua'i 'ō'ō bird and the idea to resurrect it in virtual space?

"I draw on these to create virtual landscapes with emotional and sensory impact. I think this is where the magic enters. To me, working virtually feels like jamming in music. It is immediate. Vibrant. Dynamic and alive."

JS

I interviewed Douglas H. Pratt, an ornithologist who spent forty years of his life studying the bird and its habitat. I was then later made aware of the bird all online, on youtube. The sound there had 2000 comments, which were all emotional. That drew me to realize the project, but my work started by talking to Douglas, and by 3D scanning the bird in the

Museum of Natural History in NYC. After that I contacted Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology to get access to the bird song.

SL

Your work shows the potential of VR as a way to preserve and archive something of the past that is now gone or extinct. What is important in doing such work in the context of our times, and is this a civic responsibility?

JS

I think VR is a powerful way to archive and give access to remote locations, including places lost in time. For my own work VR is a way to ask questions about what it means, when natural places become virtually archived.

SL

On a metaphysical level, how do you view the virtual space? Is the virtual space through a screen, or a headset any less real than our physical surroundings?

JS

I see it as a real, physical place, simply because any access point to something virtual relies on our senses. So to me, virtual space is a "real" space, in that it influences our eyes, ears, senses. At another level literature, fiction, is the most powerful virtual medium to me, because it relies minimally on anything else than human words. From words and ideas we can create virtual realities.

SL

What are the unexplored potentials of VR that you are excited about?

JS

I have lived by the ocean for much of my life, and I grew up freediving and exploring the

Re-Animated, Jakob Kudsk Steensen, 2018

coast of Denmark. Diving is still my absolute primary source of aesthetic inspiration, and my dream is to create a VR work based on a trip to the deep sea in a submarine.

SL

What are you currently working on?

JS

I am 3D scanning algae and bacteria in a wetland in Southern France.

SL

In the context of the current global pandemic, the "new normal" has become experiencing sites and nature through digital mediation. What does it mean to experience sites, real or imaginary, through the digital looking glass of the internet, AR/MR/VR?

JS

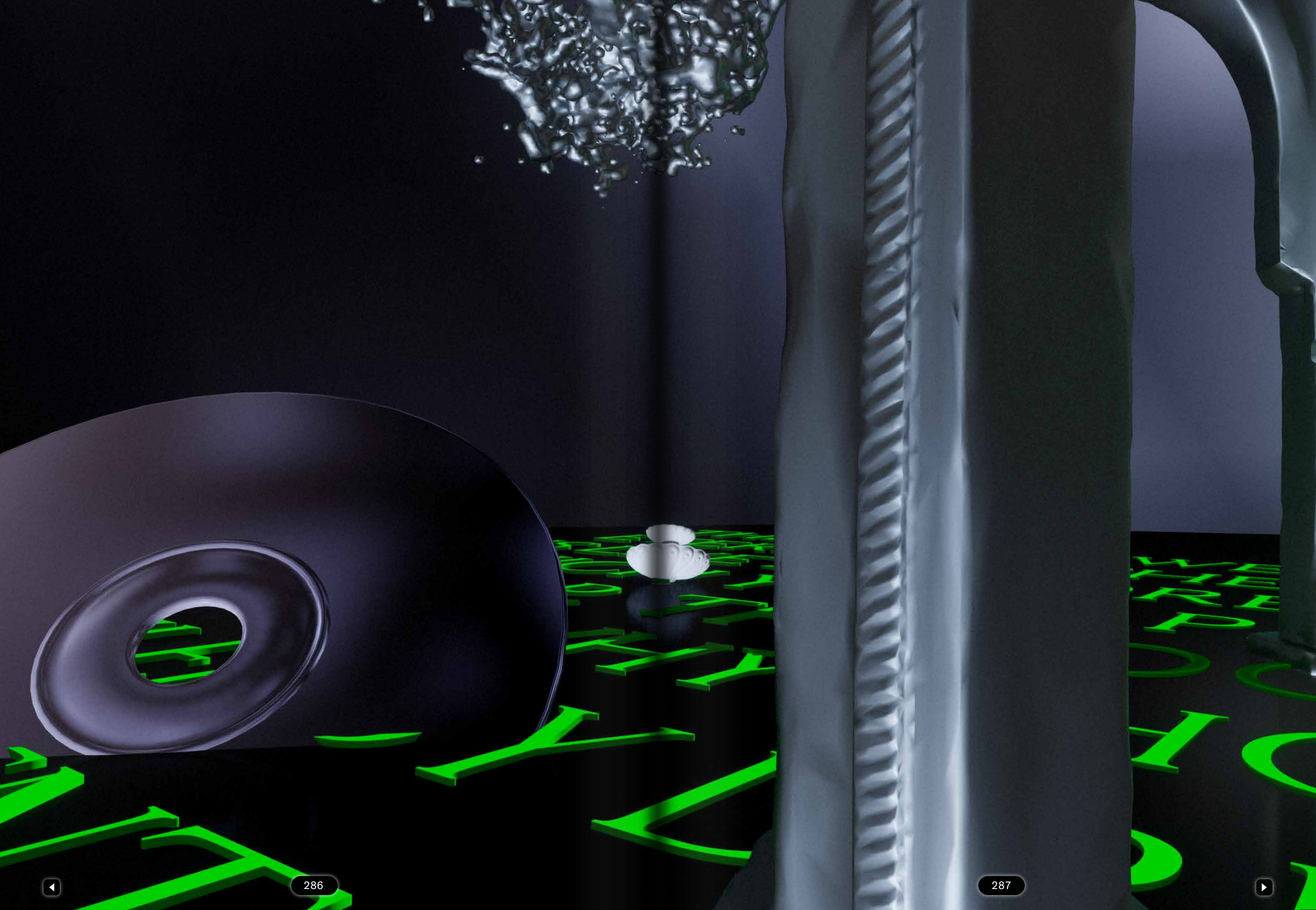This is very tricky. I think VR can allow for powerful social virtual landscapes we can

explore and share together. On the other hand, VR cannot be shown in public spaces because people cannot share headsets. But for home use, you can share virtual art wide. I think AR/MR/VR can, if done right, create a sense of intimacy and artistic space.
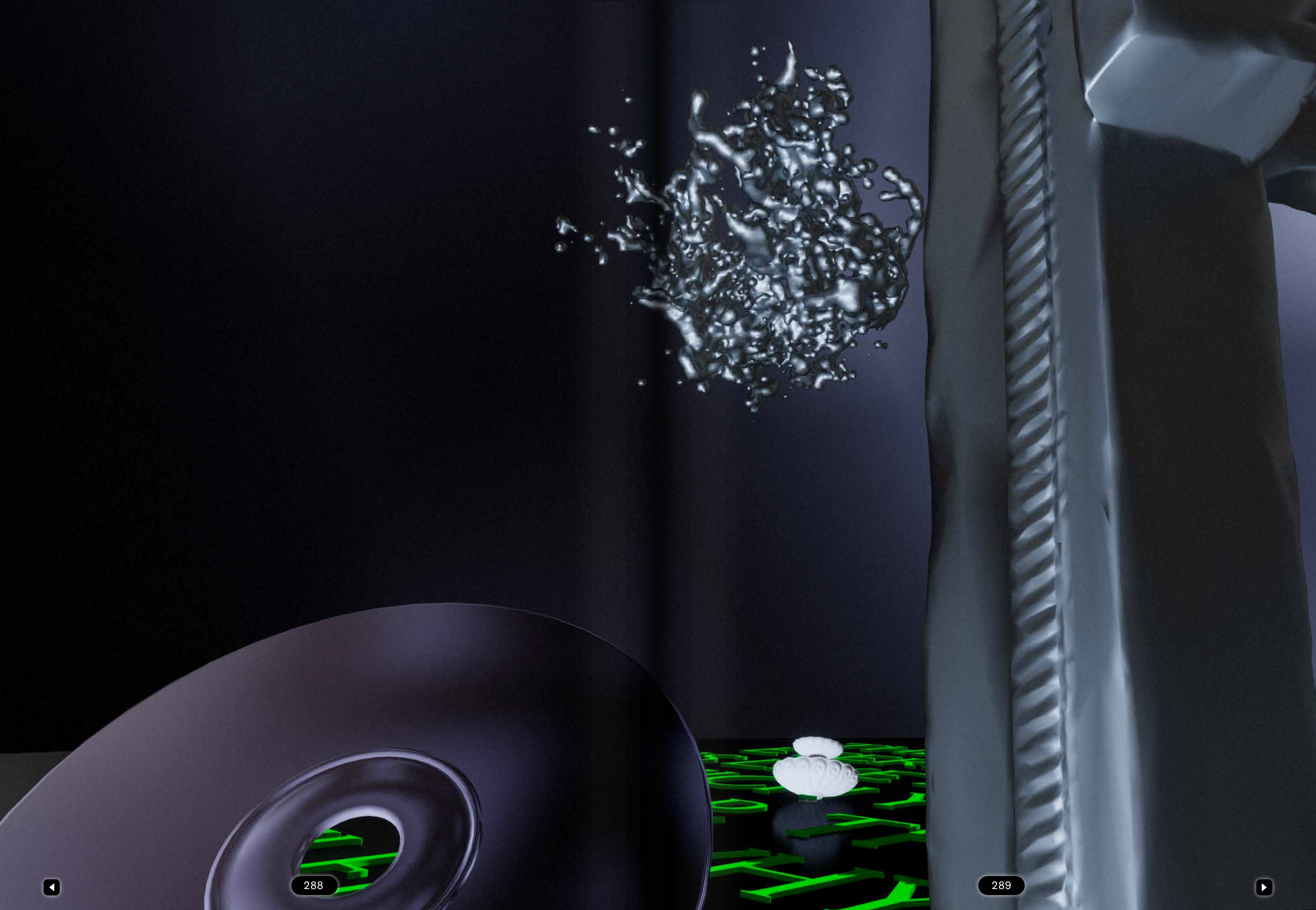
SL
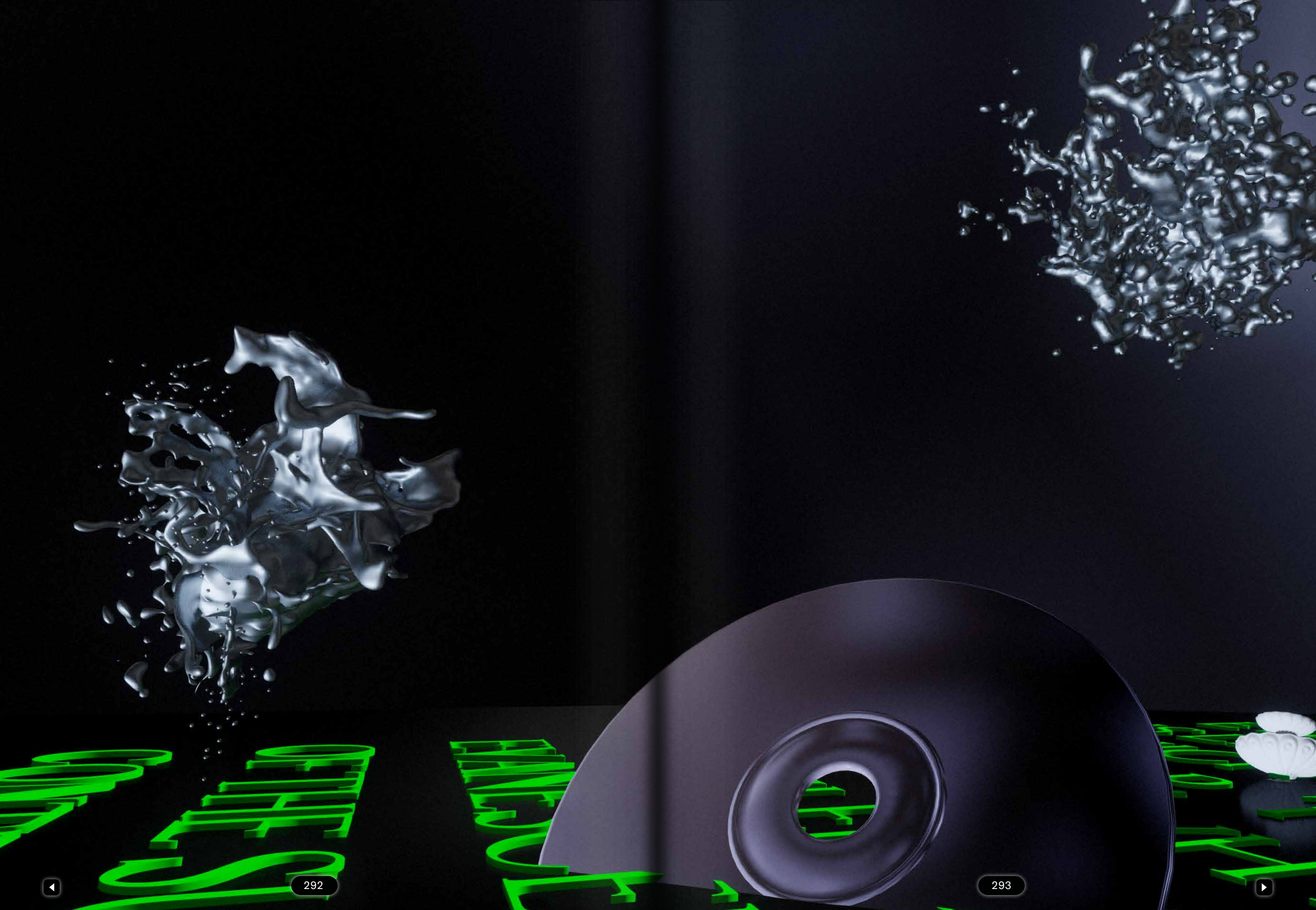
Last question, what are you currently listening to?

JS

I listen to frogs, winds, bacteria and natural elements from the Camargue in France, where I work now on my project. They run on repeat on my speakers, and through the digital environment I am creating. When I finish artworks in their last phases I surround myself as much as possible purely with related material.
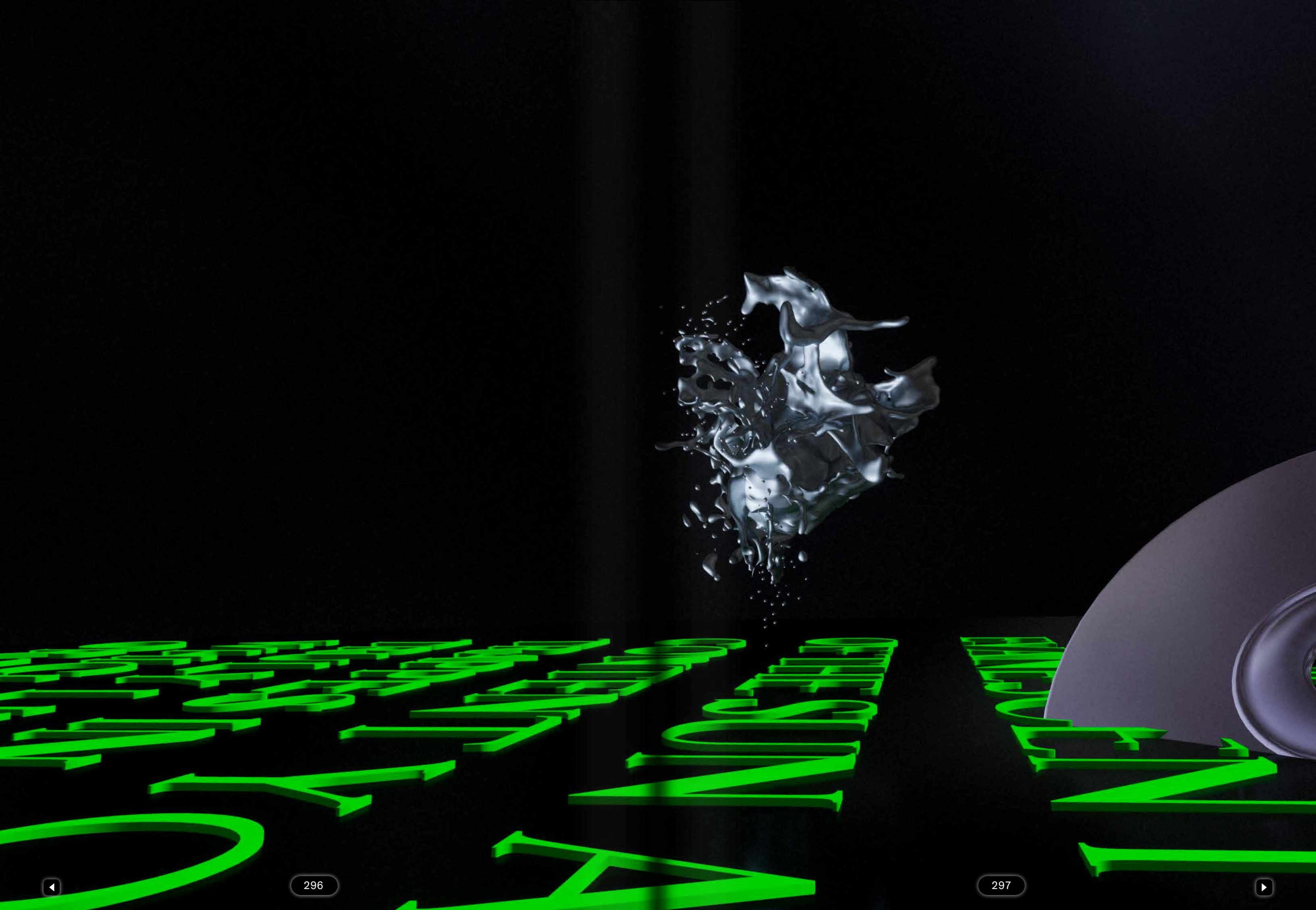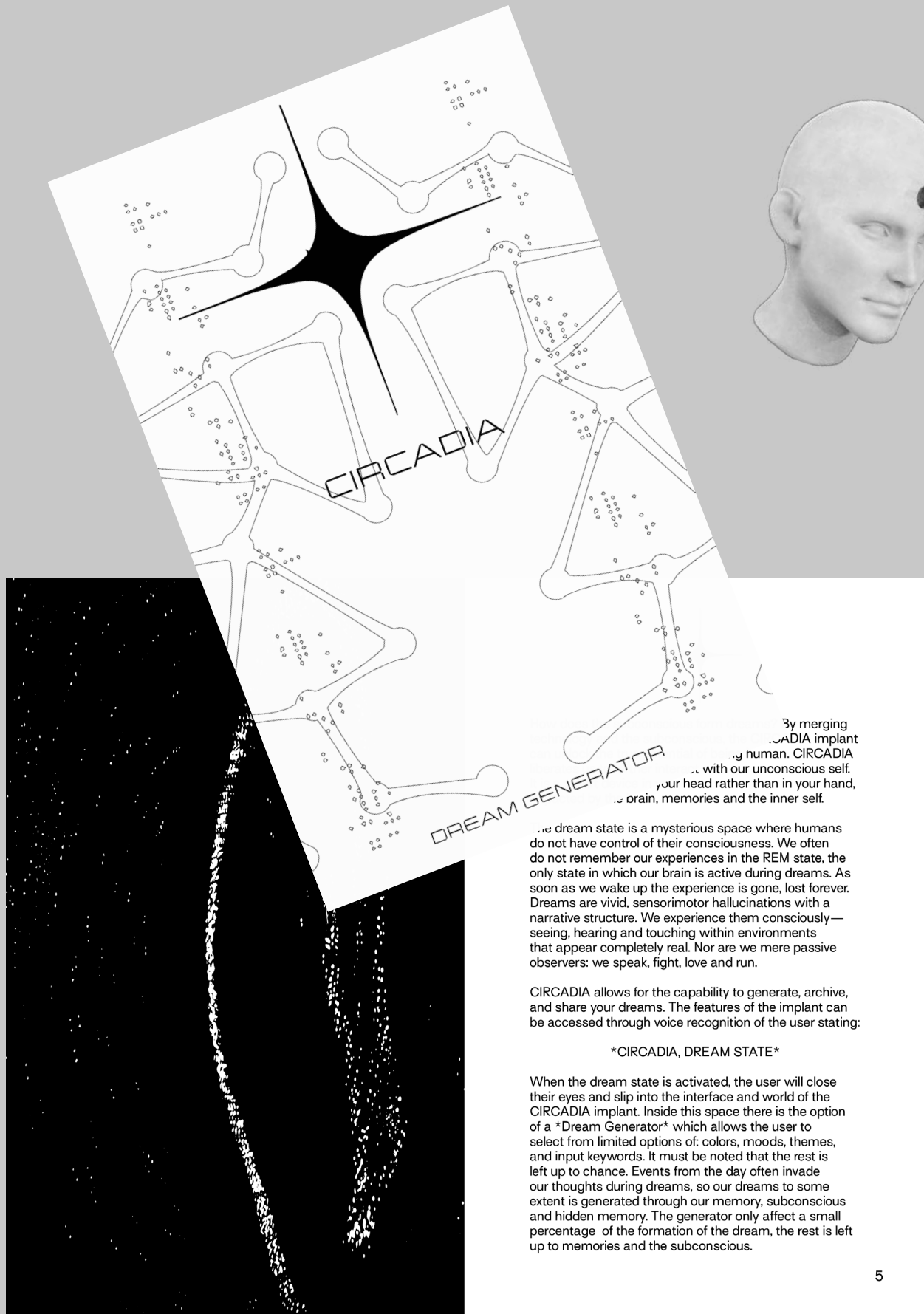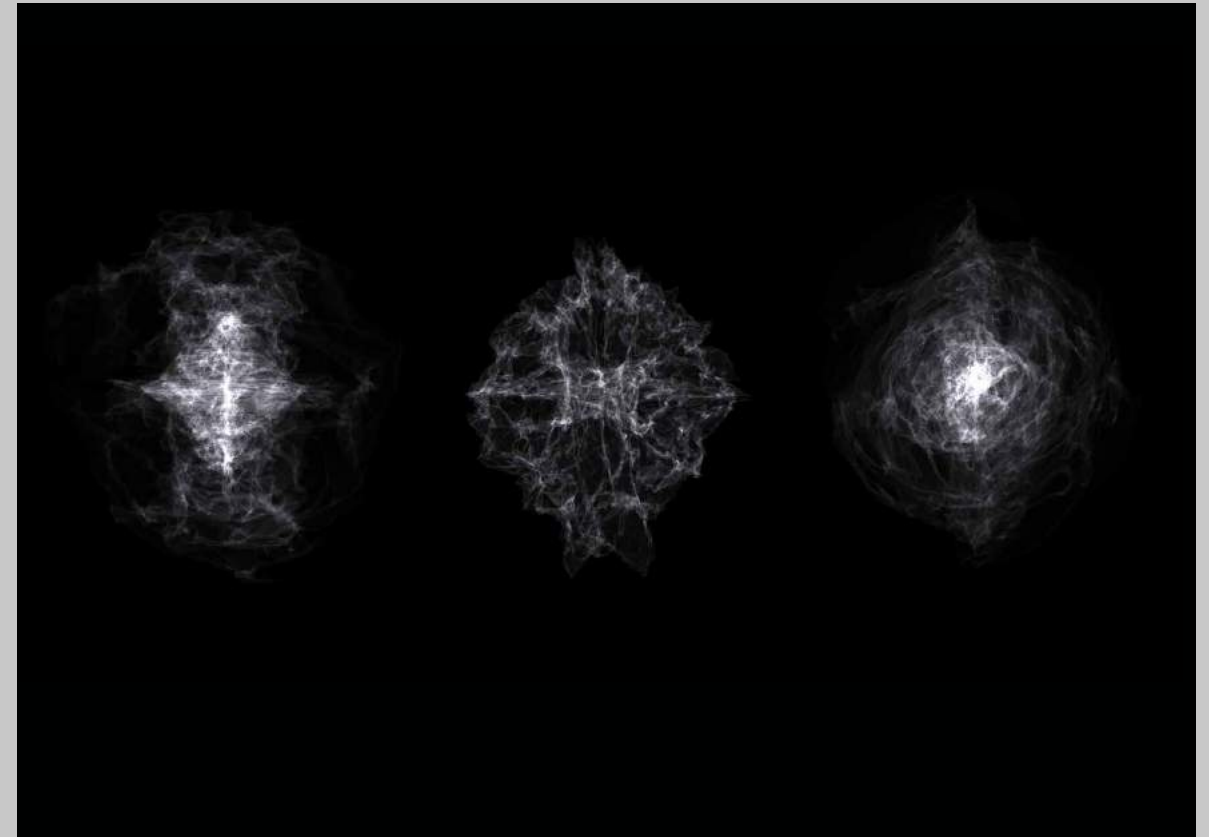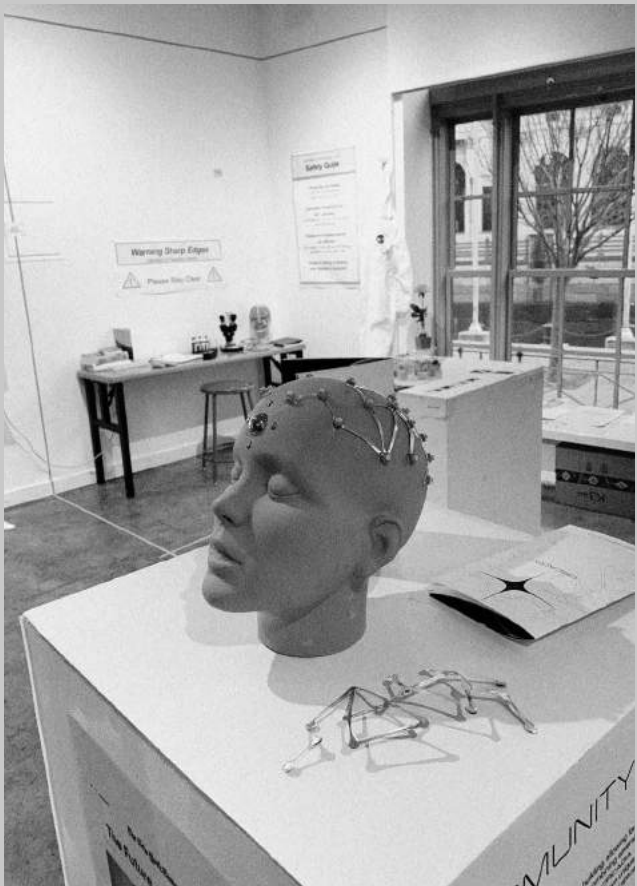
CIRCADIA

How does the subconscious form dreams? The dream state is a mysterious space where humans do not have control of their consciousness. We often do not remember our experiences in the REM state, the only state in which our brain is active during dreams. As soon as we wake up the experience is gone, lost forever. In Posthuman Design Fall 2019, we were given the opportunity to collaborate with RISD Industrial Design students on a speculative prompt. My partner Anya Liu and I imagined a world in which dreams could be generated, archived and projected. We speculated a fictional device, a dream implant called *CIRCADIA*. Similar to EEG technology, this speculative implant connects to the sensory cortex part of the brain. When the "dream state" is activated, the user will close their eyes and slip into the interface of *CIRCADIA*. Inside this space, there is the option of a dream generator that allows the user to select from color, mood, theme, and input keywords; the rest is left up to chance. Additional features of the implant include a dream library as a way to archive all previous dreams and to replay them when desired. Users will also have the option to project their dreams to share through the implant.

By merging
...CADIA implant
...g human. CIRCADIA
...t with our unconscious self.
...your head rather than in your hand,
...e brain, memories and the inner self.

The dream state is a mysterious space where humans
do not have control of their consciousness. We often
do not remember our experiences in the REM state, the
only state in which our brain is active during dreams. As
soon as we wake up the experience is gone, lost forever.
Dreams are vivid, sensorimotor hallucinations with a
narrative structure. We experience them consciously—
seeing, hearing and touching within environments
that appear completely real. Nor are we mere passive
observers: we speak, fight, love and run.

CIRCADIA allows for the capability to generate, archive,
and share your dreams. The features of the implant can
be accessed through voice recognition of the user stating:

CIRCADIA, DREAM STATE

When the dream state is activated, the user will close
their eyes and slip into the interface and world of the
CIRCADIA implant. Inside this space there is the option
of a *Dream Generator* which allows the user to
select from limited options of: colors, moods, themes,
and input keywords. It must be noted that the rest is
left up to chance. Events from the day often invade
our thoughts during dreams, so our dreams to some
extent is generated through our memory, subconscious
and hidden memory. The generator only affect a small
percentage of the formation of the dream, the rest is left
up to memories and the subconscious.

5

Brochure and manual
guide for *CIRCADIA*

Visuals created for the
'Dream Library'

Prototype for the implant

Final exhibition
documentation for
Posthuman Design,
Fall 2019

COMMUNITY

CIRCADIA also acts a form of community building, allowing for
users to project their dreams into once space, combining several
dream narratives into...

BRAINWAVE ACTIVITY

LENGTH OF TIME

COLOR WHEEL

KEYWORDS

Nighttime
Daylight
Intimate

Love
Sad
Calm
Difficult
Warmth
Neutral
Fear
Playful
Adrenaline
Relax
Bright
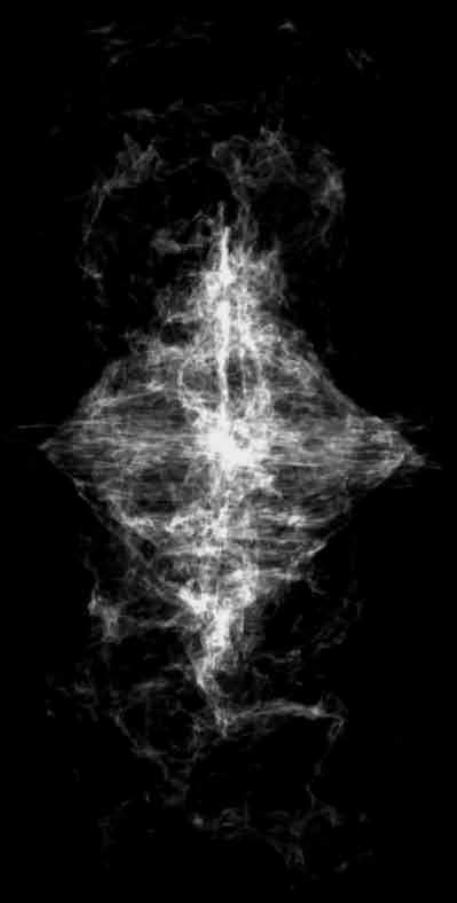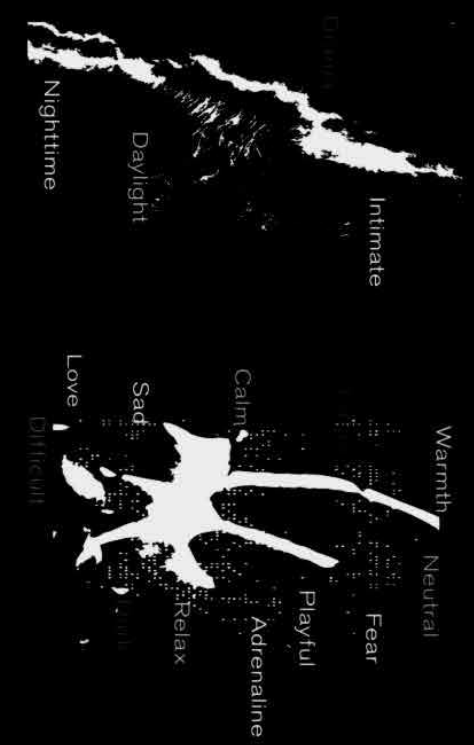
CIRCADIA, speculative
interface design
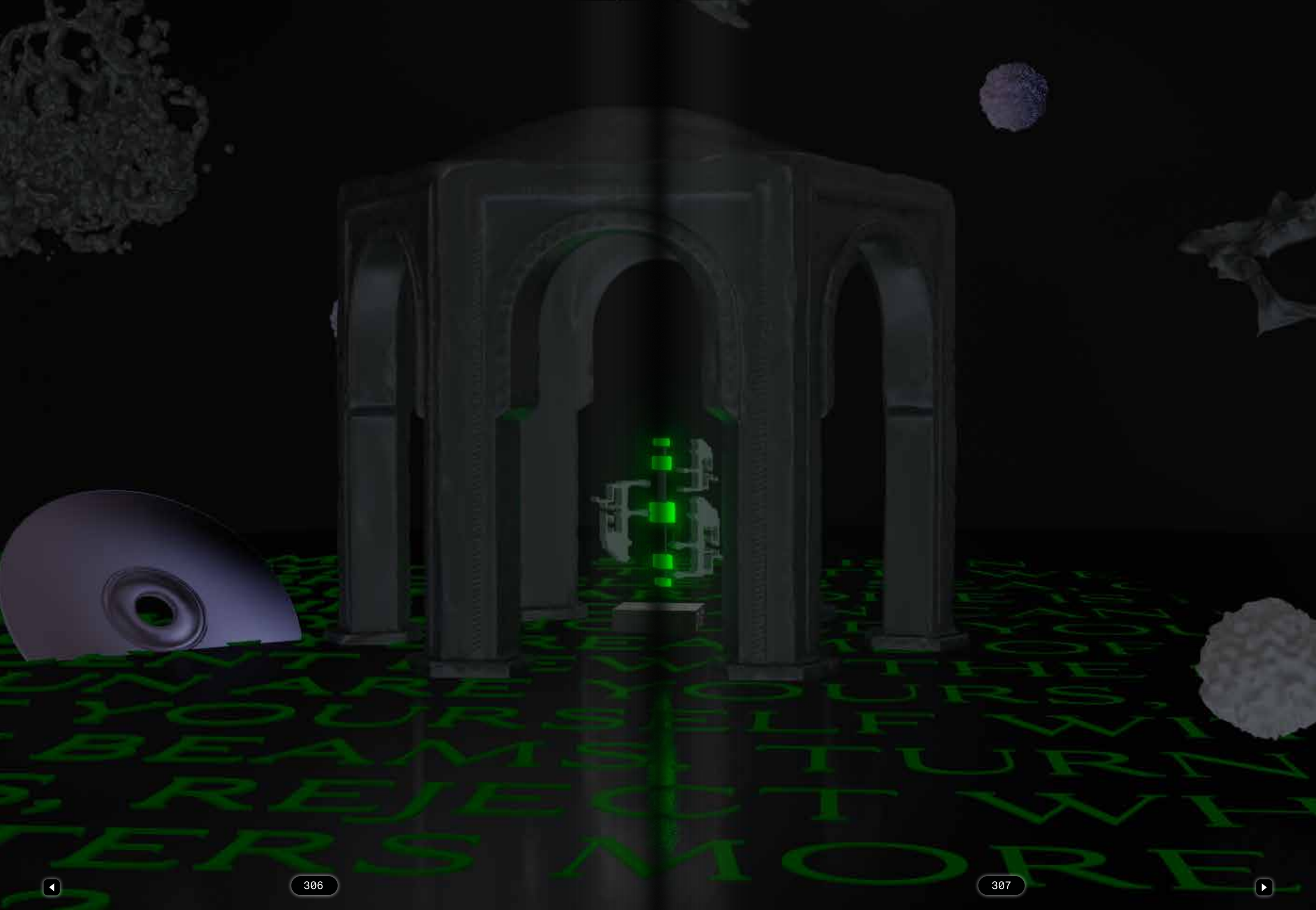
ABSTRACT

My practice, especially this virtual garden, is a collage made of media, images, and virtual space across different eras and time signatures. Graphic design can exist in a gallery, on the screen, inside headsets or in the streets. Like a lucid dream, it can be disorienting as it opens up to a more-than physical ground of experience; within the virtual, within shared memory. This reflective practice arises as a form of "anachronism." Before I could arrive at my transdisciplinary practice that considers experiences of exile and diaspora, I had to grapple with a singular question: what does it mean to visualize and materialize nostalgia for a distant world? In my effort to answer, I learned to identify as both an architect of memory and an archivist of place, and allow my work to exist in a multiverse of fields, rather than in one space. To communicate the literal and transpersonal, *Ancient Hyper Present* gathers an array of forms: editorial, kinetic, typographic, spatial, and experiential. I call forth a practice of reflection, to go through the process of seeing the unseeable or the unacknowledged.
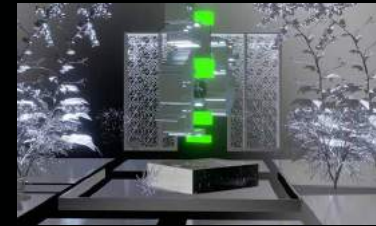
"To don goggles and a headset will bring back a sense of the shared mystical altered ...sense of reality that is so important in basically every other civilization and culture prior to big patriarchal power."

— Jaron Lanier, *Imagologies Media Philosophy*

IMAGE INDEX

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