Gray Area Stays With the Trouble

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Grand Theatre/Gray Area Exterior, 02/02/2023. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, United States, 2023. Courtesy Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Korise Jubert.

San Francisco's Gray Area is an institution working across disciplines with an explicit focus on nascent technologies and social progress. As a networked cultural incubator, Gray Area resonates with the same multi-hyphenate pathos that many of the artists in its community both embody and cultivate: the media artists, the software artists, the data artists, AI artists, audio-visual performance artists, and so on. Paola Antonelli, the Museum of Modern Art's Senior Curator of Architecture and Design as well as their Director of R&D, describes Gray Area as "a space of synthesis," where artists can experiment with ideas, metabolize and

digest new technologies, and "mix it all together so that a new culture emerges." Plurality is thus central to Gray Area's protean existence, along with a belief in the profound interconnectedness—and double-edged potential—of a post-internet ecology.

"It's art, science, technology, humanities… it gets challenging once you start listing all these things that are all part of one integrated practice," explains Barry Threw, Gray Area's Executive and Artistic Director who's been officially involved with the organization since 2008. "We're trying to break down divisions between disciplinary knowledge silos and create a space where both conceptual and tangible prototypes can be produced." Gray Area is, surprisingly, the only institution in San Francisco dedicated to art and technology. In some ways, it's reminiscent of a startup, an appropriate model for an organization situated in the Bay Area's tech nexus. And, like many startups, Gray Area has been bootstrapping since its inception, relying on a distributed revenue model that encompasses grant writing, concert ticket sales, educational workshop tuitions, private donations, corporate R&D lab partnerships, public memberships, and more. It's also agile by design. "We are constantly redefining ourselves," says Threw. "We're constantly pulling in new projects, and we keep existing out of our own momentum." Unlike most tech startups, however, Gray Area was originally—and notably—founded by a queer woman of color, Josette Melchor.

Melchor was raised by a Hispanic single mother in the Coachella Valley. In 2002, she leased a warehouse in Los Angeles for avant-garde curatorial projects that became the genesis of Gray Area. According to Melchor, Gray Area's name is "intended to evoke the concept of moving beyond traditional genre constraints and embracing creative freedom across disciplines. It also reflects the idea of a spectrum of possibilities." The year 2002 doesn't immediately register as historically significant, but this was the year when digitized data surpassed analog information worldwide, effectively crossing an event horizon that some scholars consider the true beginning of the "digital information age." This state change, from the material to the digital, has been accelerating ever since, generating new forms of artistic production, communication, collaboration, and participation, as well as increasing levels of surveillance, disinformation, and media manipulation. In this expanding ether of conspicuous dematerialization, Gray Area was born.

In 2005, Melchor relocated to the Bay Area and quickly realized there was a community of local artists making software-based work without any sort of institutional support. Gray Area was thus relaunched in San Francisco and moved around to several spaces in different neighborhoods, including a warehouse in SoMa and an old porno theater in the Tenderloin, before renovating its current space in the Mission District in 2014. Through each iteration, its network grew, attracting support from politicians, tech executives, community activists, creative coders, design professors, A/V nerds, engineers, and electronic musicians. Gray Area's headquarters, historically known as the Grand Theater, is 10,000 square feet and from the 1940s–1980s housed a single-screen cinema and, more recently, a convenience

store. The Mission District, a predominantly Latino community, connects Gray Area to Melchor's cultural heritage and encapsulates an ethos of inclusion and accessibility that the organization seeks to continually nurture and evolve.

Gray Area formally established its 501c3 status in 2008 and currently operates across numerous modalities under the banner of its nonprofit mission: "applying culture and technology for social good." It operates an incubator platform, curates exhibition and performance programs, runs educational workshops, hosts concerts, conferences, and lectures, and produces two annual festivals: the eponymous Gray Area Festival, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this year, and the Recombinant Festival, dedicated to immersive A/V performances and spatial experimentation. In 2019, after more than ten years, Melchor stepped down from her position (she's currently the Global Placemaking Lead at Google) and Threw assumed the role of Executive and Artistic Director. He oversees a full-time staff of twelve employees and twenty volunteers, as well as a governance and advisory board. The governance board is composed of eight members who have all been active supporters through their relative spheres of influence, from community organizers to electronic music producers. Governance board members have the option to serve three terms of two years each, while the advisory board is a more informal network of about a dozen trusted advocates and practitioners, artists, and professors. The organization's educational offerings comprise courses that teach technical skills through the production of creative work like their Creative Code Intensive, a survey course of foundational skills for technology-driven art, and DWeb for Creators, which explores issues around decentralization, such as data rights. They also operate a free lending library of music production equipment, and this is all in addition to Gray Area's grant-making initiatives, which have distributed over 1.8 million dollars in fiscal support directly to artists over the past year alone.

Two projects in particular display Gray Area's prescient synthesis of art and technology. In 2016, they mounted *DeepDream: The Art of Neural Networks*, the first exhibition of art created via a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN). As a form of AI, GANs employ machine learning and artificial neural networks to produce an increasingly varied range of media, from psychedelic landscapes to celebrity deepfakes. Among the artists featured in Gray Area's exhibition was Alexander Mordvintsev, the Google engineer who created the program DeepDream, which first introduced GANs to the general public in 2015. The second project, *Distributed Systems*, was a survey show of NFT and blockchain art that Gray Area exhibited in 2018, three years before the historic 69 million dollar auction result of Beeple's NFT *EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5,000 DAYS* (2021) at Christie's, which trumpeted the arrival of this new digital commodity with hyperbolic fanfare. For many in the white cube art world, NFTs represent speculative art investing run amok. However, McKenzie Wark, the celebrated scholar who wrote *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004), and was a keynote speaker at the 2021 *Gray Area Festival: Worlding Protocol*, takes a more historical perspective. "Art has always been about technology," she writes via email. "Impressionist painting is, among other things, about

the pigments that were starting to be made at that time. The constraint with fine art is always about producing a work that can be a singular repository of value. These days artworks are a special class of financial instrument. I expect those will continue to evolve."

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Topology,* 2021. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Barak Shrama.

In 2023, Gray Area mounted its most ambitious exhibition to date—a solo show by celebrated media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer entitled *TECHS-MECHS*. A tongue-in-cheek play on words, *TECHS-MECHS* also paid deferential tribute to the legacy of Mexican contributions to techno-culture that have been long overshadowed by Silicon Valley and the Bay Area's myopic narrative as the genesis of all technological progress. Lozano-Hemmer, who's represented by Pace Gallery (as well as several mid-sized galleries that were instrumental in his early career), was born in Mexico City and identifies as Mexican-Canadian. From his studio in Montreal, he explained via Zoom that ever since he gave a lecture in Mexico City, and was chastised by an audience member for making art that is "not very Mexican," he's been keeping track of "a tradition of experimentation that has taken place in Mexico at the intersection of technology and culture."

Lozano-Hemmer wanted his exhibition at Gray Area to explode the stereotype of what constitutes "Mexican art." He was acutely excited to present this show in the Mission District, specifically, considering its status as a predominantly Latino community. "Mexico was a

pioneer of the first color TV," he says. "We invented cybernetics, the birth control pill, microtonal music, it just goes on and on." He also points to a quote by Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, who once said that "Mexico used to export utopia and today we export apocalypse." To Lozano-Hemmer, *Techs-Mechs* was a way to pay homage to the Mexicans who came before him and were able to separate technology from its "military or corporate backdrops" by experimenting with tech for more artistic and imaginative uses.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Remote Pulse*, 2019. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Joy Ding.

Lozano-Hemmer is best known for his large-scale multimedia installations that digitally transcode biometric data, such as a human pulse, into hauntingly beautiful interactions. He believes, however, that this impulse to classify Mexican artists as either utopian or apocalyptic has left many artists lost to the chasm between the binary, which, perhaps ironically, is where digital art becomes increasingly urgent. "The digital is that place that is a 'no place'...it's de-territorialized. It has an appeal beyond the border…but the world is also becoming more and more polarized. And so I love the idea that there are lessons to be learned from border struggle and from border coexistence. The media tends to cover only the darker adversarial narratives, but there are also many great stories of coexistence and of poetry and of sharing and of complicity and oneness—that's what I wanted to highlight." Lozano-Hemmer also acknowledges that, with respect to their presence in a gentrifying community—where they are both part of the solution and emblematic of the problem—Gray

Area is admirably "staying with the trouble," a nod to the 2016 book of the same title by writer and theorist Donna Haraway (who also penned the groundbreaking 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto") that generally refers to humanity's ongoing reconciliation with all of the Anthropocene's calamitous effects, from climate change to mass extinction, while bestowing honor on those who refuse the languorous comforts of passive denial.

In terraforming new digital cultures, Gray Area's artist community is resoundingly humanistic. Like Lozano-Hemmers's interactive installations, Lauren Lee McCarthy, an icon in the creative coding world, will mount a dual exhibition at Gray Area in the fall of 2024 that utilizes visitors' biodata to explore highly personal and human-centric topics—surrogacy and saliva. During the exhibition, entitled *Bodily Autonomy*, participants will be able to exchange their saliva with others in a highly controlled environment that feels both overtly clinical and seductively speculative. As McCarthy's project statement explains, "We've now been trained to regularly swab, spit, and give up ownership of our bodily substances to corporations and government-run centers. These fluids hold the data of our DNA, personal information, and identity." By transforming an art space into a kind of medical lab, McCarthy reframes the increasingly intrusive "terms and conditions" of contemporary society, which many of us have grown accustomed to instinctively accepting, without reading the fine print.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Topology*, 2021. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, United States, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Drew Altizer.

Beyond her performative art practice, McCarthy is also an associate professor of Design Media Arts at UCLA and the creator of p5.js, a programming language she developed in 2013 that was designed to make coding accessible to "artists, designers, educators, beginners, and anyone else," as per its website. Like Gray Area's founder, McCarthy is a woman of color, proactively navigating a space that's overwhelmingly male and white. Her work has always maintained a commitment to inclusion and a critical interpretation of the algorithmic status quo. She's been in Gray Area's orbit for more than ten years—leading workshops and participating in festivals, conferences, and incubator initiatives—a testament to the organization's long-standing relationships with its community of artists, educators, and social activists (and artist-educator-social activists).

McCarthy says that she developed p5.js using a set of values as parameters, rather than a list of technical functions. She released it as open-source software, allowing anyone to add to it, modify it, and disseminate it for any purpose. At its best, the open-source software movement symbolizes a quasi-proletariat reckoning with Big Tech. However, it's also evolved over the past twenty-odd years, accelerating with the advent of new online code repositories, dev environments, and social media platforms. Today, open-source culture illustrates how a movement can mutate in the spaces between theory and practice. McCarthy points out that "open" doesn't mean "open for everyone" and that there's still a high level of privilege and access wrapped up in a movement that endows altruism on those with both the free time and requisite equipment to volunteer their services and expertise. Wark shares McCarthy's sentiment, writing that open-source culture is "not utopian. It turns out that markets always require non-markets to try to compensate for the damage markets do, or to provide forms of organization for which markets are poor solutions, or to produce values markets will later co-opt."

Cinechamber at Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2016. Courtesy Recombinant Media Labs and Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Mariah Tiffany.

McCarthy is currently working on setting up a new lab practice at UCLA with a focus on "Social Software," together with fellow UCLA professor and artist Casey Reas. One of the first artists to be exhibited at Gray Area in the mid-2000s, Reas is globally revered for his prolific contributions to media art. In 2001, while still a grad student at MIT's Media Lab, he co-founded Processing, a programming language (and now a nonprofit foundation) with the mission "to promote software learning within the arts, artistic learning within technology-related fields, and to celebrate the diverse communities that make these fields vibrant, liberatory, and innovative."

Reas explains over Zoom that open-source software was originally called "Free Software" and that "the idea was not that it was without cost, but that the software was free as in 'freedom.' It's problematic language in English; it makes more sense in other languages, like *libre* [in Spanish], for example. So the term 'open source' was actually a capitalist-friendly way of sort of rebranding and remarketing what, at that time, was called Free Software." Reas understands this distinction as a means of social programming, a way to make tech concepts and/or products overtly palatable for a broad audience. One example of this rebranding is how we've all come to associate remote digital storage with "the cloud," rather than with a data center or server farm that not only takes over hundreds of acres of actual

land but also requires immense amounts of electricity to run at optimum levels and conjures dystopian visions straight out of *The Matrix*. In terms of new technologies, branding becomes a critical key to user adoption and subsequent neoliberal market performance.

Morehshin Allahyari, *Ebu* from the series "Material Speculation: ISIS," 3D printed resin and memory card, 2015. Courtesy the artist.

When it comes to "Free Software" and "Open-Source Software," Reas doesn't mince words. "Right now, I really don't like either term," he says. "I really like the idea of 'Public Code'—like public radio. I think these are things that are social goods, things that we should have access to via shared infrastructure. I think software is too important to be left to corporate interests and I think artists should be more in control of their own tools. You know, it goes for everything from tax software to voting software, to artist tools. I think that stuff should all be public and open." This forms the basis of UCLA's "Social Software" lab and echoes much of the work supported by Gray Area.
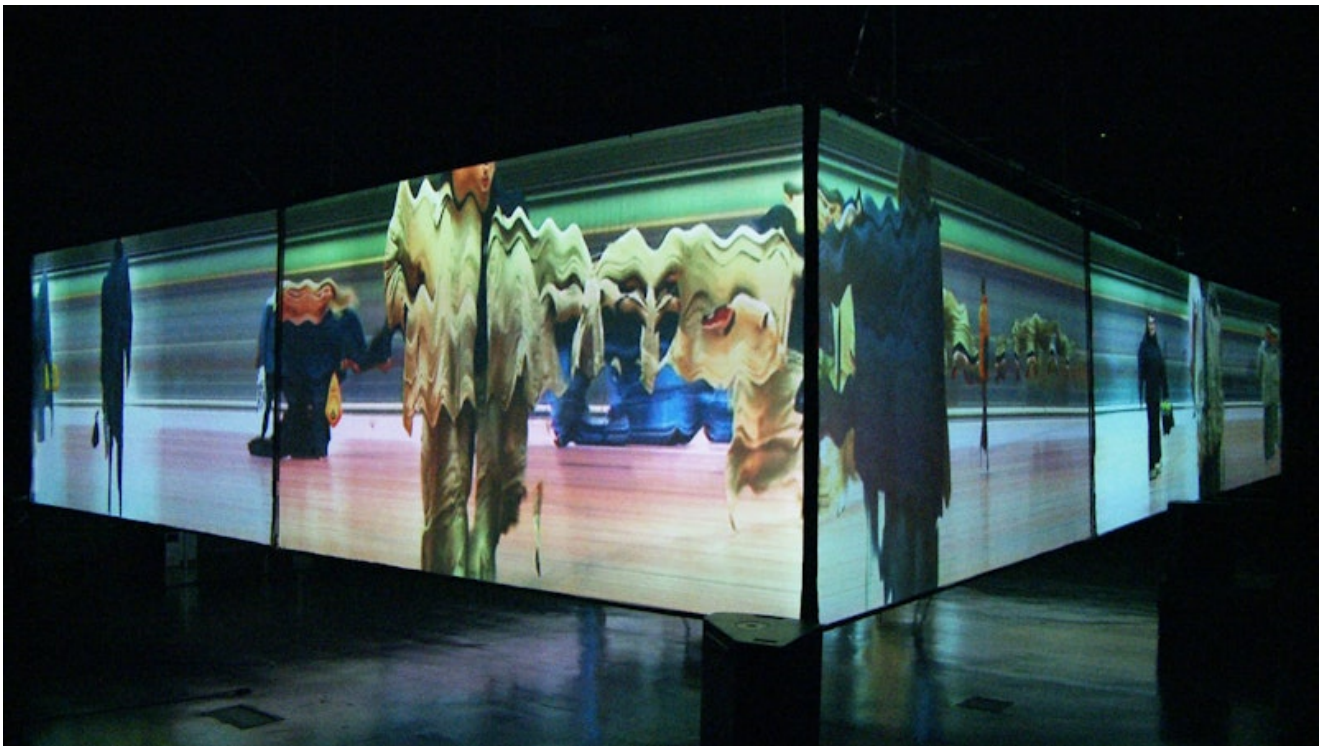
Biosphere, Egbert Mittelstadt, *Birds Fly*, 2021. Cinechamber at Gray Area, San Francisco, California, United States, 2021. Courtesy Recombinant Media Labs and Gray Area, San Francisco.

At its core, Gray Area's mission ("applying culture and technology for social good") is as focused on humanity as it is on technology, if not more so. That ethos extends to the values encompassed by social software, which, as Reas summarizes, is "the idea is that we need to keep people first, and we need to keep in mind what software can and can't do. I think, oftentimes, there are different frames of seeing the world, and sometimes the optimum technical solution can be a social disaster." As a means of steering tech in a more equitable

direction, Reas says, "It's important for all technology to be developed thoughtfully and within the context of human needs and culture, rather than at odds with that. AI and algorithms have a lot of embedded bias in them, but I think a humanist point of view can help us escape some of these problematic things."

Lozano-Hemmer, McCarthy, and Reas all belong to an implicitly established order of blue-chip media artists. However, Gray Area has also served emerging artists at the very beginning of their careers, providing a sounding board, a stage, mentors, grant money, or some combination of these resources as they develop their creative practices. Iranian artist Morehshin Allahyari received a Gray Area fellowship in 2014, shortly after earning her MFA. In the years since, she's produced a profound body of work that explicitly critiques and seeks to dismantle "digital colonialism," a term she arguably coined and continues to refine. She's returned to Gray Area for myriad events: she participated in the 2020 Gray Area Festival, was awarded a grant in 2022 to develop a film that's still in production, and was most recently included in the exhibition *Difference Machines,* presented in 2023. Among Allahyari's major works are *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* (2016) and *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015–16), both of which leveraged open-source culture, crowd-sourced knowledge, and emergent 3D printing technologies to disrupt oppressive power structures—digital methodologies that Gray Area actively supports. In 2021 she was awarded a United States Artist Fellowship (alongside McCarthy) and her work is now in the permanent collections of institutions including the Whitney Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Installation view: *Difference Machines*, Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2023. Courtesy Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Gary Sexton.

The 3D Additivist Cookbook, which Allayhari created in 2016 together with artist and academic Daniel Rourke, makes obvious reference to the 1971 publication *The Anarchist Cookbook* by William Powell, but is inherently speculative rather than violent. Allayhari and Rourke's *Cookbook* compiled entries crowdsourced from more than 100 artists and creators following the publication of their *Additivist Manifesto* (2015). According to the project's website, "Additivist" is "a portmanteau of *additive* and *activism*: a movement concerned with critiquing 'radical' new technologies in fablabs, workshops, and classrooms; at social, ecological, and global scales. *The 3D Additivist Cookbook* questions whether it's possible to change the world without also changing ourselves, and what the implications are of taking a position." The resulting compendium, available for free as a downloadable PDF, includes various 3D printable objects (via .obj and .stl files), as well as myriad texts, recipes, and schematics—a radically-charged blueprint for how to exist in the 21st century and beyond.

Rian Ciela Hammond, *Root Picker*, 2021. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Gary Sexton.

Allahyari and Rourke's manifesto (reprinted in the *Additivist Cookbook*) proffers a kind of makers' uprising, using the very same materials, especially plastic, that serve to both improve our collective existence and pollute it—infiltrating our bodies, environments, and

even outer space, resulting in a kind of cyborgification of life as we know it:

> *The 3D print then becomes a symptom of a systemic malady. An aesthetics of exaptation, with the peculiar beauty to be found in reiteration; in making a mesh. This is where cruelty and creativity are reconciled: in the appropriation of all planetary matter to innovate on biological prototypes. From the purest thermoplastic, from the cleanest photopolymer, and shiniest sintered metals we propose to forge anarchy, revolt and distemper. Let us birth disarray from its digital chamber.*

While the *Additivist Manifesto* takes an irreverent approach to political protest through emerging technologies, Allahyari's work *Material Speculation: ISIS* is an example of real-time ideological revolt made possible via digital channels. In 2015, ISIS published a video on YouTube documenting the destruction of a series of artifacts displayed in Iraq's Mosul Museum, which they denounced as "idolatrous." These artifacts were considered historically significant for the hybrid nature of their depictions, combining stylized attributes associated with both Eastern and Western religions. Over the next year, Allahyari worked remotely with a group of curators, archivists, and historians who were on the ground in Iraq to recover as many images and details of the destroyed artifacts as possible. She then converted all the information into CAD files that were 3D printed as twelve reincarnated, miniature sculptures. A USB drive and memory card archiving the research, printable files, location maps, and other references are embedded into each sculpture, ensuring the preservation of that artifact's metahistory and cultural data, and transforming each sculpture into a time capsule, according to the artist. She later expanded the project and released her entire research dossier online, making it available to the general public.

Morehshin Allahyari, *Gorgon* from the series "Material Speculation: ISIS," 3D printed resin and memory card, 2016. Courtesy the artist.

Allahyari's ongoing efforts to deconstruct legacies of digital colonialism, defined as "the tendency for information technologies to be deployed in ways that reproduce colonial power relations," is central to her practice. While she was working on *Material Speculation: ISIS*, Allahyari says she was "involved with a number of events, including at places like Gray Area, where there were a lot of conversations happening around the power of sharing information. In this case, how sharing—or the act of giving more and more access to this history—becomes an act of resistance to the removal of that history. But, as time passed, I personally became more interested in questions such as, 'When is open source inherently good, when is open source a point of power, and when is it a point of control?' And what does it mean to give access to knowledge but also protect knowledge? Or, how to give knowledge to a specific community or group of people rather than just something that everyone can have access to, like in a situation where there are colonial power structures—especially between the global north and global south." Allahyari's approach embodies the critical inquiry that Gray Area intentionally facilitates, the understanding that any discourse encompassing art, technology—and the integrated practice Barry Threw described—must also acknowledge that we can no longer assume a black-and-white duality. Nothing is absolute, nor completely

autonomous. Everything resides in a multiverse of efficacy, a gray area that begets edification through a plurality of perspectives, access, and both lived and simulated experiences.

Grand Theatre/Gray Area Exterior, 02/07/2020. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2020. Courtesy Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Beth LaBerge.

In 2023, Gray Area hosted the touring group exhibition *Difference Machines: Technology and Identity in Contemporary Art*, curated by Dr. Tina Rivers Ryan of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (where it was first shown), and Paul Vanouse, a media artist and professor at the University of Buffalo. "'The forerunner of the computer was called a "difference engine,' as it was used to calculate the differences between numbers," according to the exhibition text. "Today, we are surrounded by 'difference machines,' or computers that are used to encode the differences between us." *Difference Machines* includes work by both Allahyari and Lozano-Hemmer, among other notable artists, and won the 2022 Award for Excellence from the Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC). Conceptually, it embraces the ambivalence that has come to define the post-internet era, recognizing the conflicting perspectives of the artists whose works are included in the show. "Many [artists] examine how digital systems contribute to the exclusion, erasure, and exploitation of marginalized people. Others emphasize how digital tools can be repurposed to tell more inclusive stories or imagine new ways of being."

Louis-Philippe Demers and Bill Vorn, *Inferno*, 2019. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco.

Over email, Dr. Ryan explained her own experience with the Janus-faced nature of the polemics surrounding the art/tech field. "On a personal level, I'm very invested in the idea of having a critical relationship to technology: I look a lot to scholars … not to mention all of the amazing artists who have been sounding the alarm on everything ranging from predictive policing to IP theft to the ethics of bioengineering. But I do think that it's also important to acknowledge the advantages and even pleasures of digital tools, too," she writes. "What drew me to the field is my love of the particular aesthetic experiences that digital tools have enabled, as well as the more utopian (albeit naive) dreams of egalitarianism and connection." The works featured in *Difference Machines* change and respond to variables presented by geographic and socio-economic localities, current events, individual perception, (dis)abilities, and more. As such, these works "transform the space of the museum into a laboratory for experimenting with our increasingly powerful 'difference machines,' as we strive to invent a more equitable future," a thesis that could easily double as a mission statement for Gray Area itself.

With so much attention paid to the future (or "futures," to be precise), it's also important to emphasize that, as it's evolved, Gray Area's community has become inexorably linked to San Francisco and the Bay Area's esoteric history of experimental and immersive performances, extending back to the city's "Bed-ins" and the Summer of Love. Self-described "experiential

engineer" Naut Humon (read that aloud for its intended effect) has been involved with the underground electronic music scene since the 1960s, and with Gray Area since the mid-2000s. Humon is the founder of Recombinant Media Labs (RML), which was founded as a kind of artistic and experimental R&D platform for "spatial media synthesis; intermodal works using image, light, sound and other disseminated media in three-dimensional space." In the 1970s, after years of mounting nomadic experimental performances in alternative venues, Humon consolidated his activities at "the Compound," a warehouse based just outside of San Francisco, which led to the founding of Asphodel, a recording label that has produced albums by icons including Lou Reed, Mix Master Mike, Iannis Xenakis, Christian Marclay, and John Cage, among many others. Humon was also the lead organizer of the Digital Music category for the Arts Electronica festival for ten years and continues to work as the artistic director of RML's CineChamber, a panoramic A/V performance apparatus composed of ten responsive screens and 360-degree spatialized sound, which has toured international venues including the Barbican Centre in London, but also has a permanent home base at Gray Area.

Rhizomatiks Research, ELEVENPLAY, and Kyle McDonald, *discrete figures*, 2019. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, United States, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco.

Humon remains an impassioned ambassador for the "sidestream," the fringe-dwelling avant-garde who, in his view, will never be mainstream. He understands all of Gray Area's various art/tech genres and micro-communities as "tributaries coming off a main river," which one can explore separately but all of which flow from the same source. Humon also contextualizes Gray Area in a tradition of underground media arts that have been active in San Francisco for decades, supported by a rich history of experimental happenings that is unique to the area. According to Threw, who began supporting Gray Area as part of RML, this decentralized yet region-specific institutional knowledge renders Gray Area as a kind of pedagogical outlier, especially in relation to organizations such as the MIT Media Lab, New Inc. at the New Museum, and Eyebeam. "One thing that I am really grateful to Gray Area for is the way they've really maintained this kind of radical hacker spirit to the space," adds McCarthy. "There's an energy there that makes things feel possible even when they should be impossible and I think that's really meaningful."

McCarthy understands how learning to leverage technology, for artists and everyone else, becomes a kind of existential imperative, catalyzed by the realization that one "doesn't have to just be a user." Lozano-Hemmer takes it one step further, stating, "To study technology certainly is to study ourselves. Working with technology is not about novelty, it's about being truthful—truthful to the moment that we live in, our relationships, our wars, our economy, everything's mediated through these global networks of communication, which could not be possible without technology." He also believes that, "The notion of 'human' as somehow separate from that which we produce is no longer acceptable. We now know that what we create changes us and is inseparable from us."

Stephanie Andrews, *Immersive Game of Life*, 2020. Gray Area, San Francisco, California, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Gray Area, San Francisco. Photo: Naveed Ahmad.

Figuratively speaking, the gray area is where we all live now—somewhere on the spectrum between apocalypse and utopia (and all the other binaries). Art, as a visual language, is just another lens through which to interpret our collective experience and speculate on all potential trajectories. Gray Area's work is both localized and "borderless," parsing new worlds designed to reveal the manifold complexities of life in the digital information age. As an extension of our zeitgeist, Gray Area is staying with the trouble, striving to insert equity and accountability into pre-existing frameworks and to evolve a proactive tech diplomacy that's socially-aware, objectively critical, radically accessible, and artistically motivated.