





# WHISPERING VOID

Michèle Sennesael

## **CONTENTS**



Introduction	9
Thesis Work	13
The Exhibition	39
Other Works	62
A Matter of Time	63
Chased by Time	67
Rewriting the Future	74
Remembering	81
Reaching Through the Other Side	86
Into the Light	92
Undefined Beauty	100
Conclusion	103
Footnotes	106
Bibliography	107



As a photographer, all I focused on was the visible world but at the end of 2015 fundamental life changes inspired me to refocus and move to New York.

Documenting a home birth in Brooklyn was the starting point for the long-term photography project in Central America, *Old Traditions and New Rituals*. This documentary, on the evolution of reproductive and maternal health in Central America, pushed me to move towards new directions.

After the summer of 2017, I relocated to Alfred, NY, where I began pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Electronic Arts after attending a 4-week comprehensive summer workshop in sound, video and print at Alfred University, Alfred, NY.

In graduate school, my practice spans installation, drawing, photography, sound and video. I created abstract works which often examine concepts of time, density, and matter as well as deep human emotions and motivations. Most recently, I turned my focus more into sound visualizations, exploring the connections between art, nature, and science.

## INTRODUCTION

During the past two years, to create work, I found inspiration in the love for Nature in all her manifestations. Nature triggers my interest to discover the illusive places where we meet her. This goes hand in hand with the urge to learn more about the senses, colors, forms and perfumes she spreads. Despite our endless efforts to connect with her, much remains hidden from us.

During my practice, acoustics started to play an important role in my work. Sound is always there and present, it is hard to imagine a world without it but what would it look like? The work *Whispering Void*, created for my Master of Fine Arts Thesis exhibition, attempts to unravel the characteristics of sound and to reveal its sculptural characteristics, in order to visualize them for human perception. Just like the hidden parts in nature, sound cannot be seen neither touched.

Understanding the process of transition and finding new ways to incorporate this in your artwork takes time. My first steps in this new direction were made during a residency Upstate New York where I created the award-winning series *Undefined Beauty*. I found the inspiration for this body of photographic work in the unlimited beauty of nature that surrounds us. The images are creations based on imaginary landscapes that occur in my dreams. It was a way to remind myself how differently we all perceive the world. My aim was to inspire the audience, looking beyond the obvious and observe our surroundings from a different perspective. This new form of observation and deep looking opened my eyes and stimulated me to see the world not only through my eyes but with my ears. As a consequence, I added sound to my photographic work.

During the summer class I attended at Alfred University (summer 2017), I began to understand the impact of sound on our daily life even better. As a result, sound started to play an even bigger role in my work. When we get overwhelmed or tired, we can shut our eyes but we never have a chance to turn off the sound.

My biggest challenge is to create an atmosphere beyond the distraction of the ordinary. As an artist, the outcome is secondary to the process itself. I am especially interested in creating a feeling that captures the fragility and beauty of imperfect perfection, that captures the uniqueness of the subject.

To understand the nature of Nature and find ways to express the parts that otherwise remain invisible, technology can be used to visualize this hidden world.

Many of the works I produced during the past two years combine different media types. The delicate balance and juxtaposition of opposites may provoke or awaken different senses. Since observing nature is the starting point to create my work, it feels intuitive to combine various media. The work *Remembering* (described further in this book), is a good example to state this. For this work, I combined photography, video, and sound with other elements. Digital prints were printed on regular paper and transparent film. To address the sense of movement, an industrial floor van moved the fabric on which a video was projected. Mimicking old photography techniques gave the digital prints the feeling of being old glass plate negatives. The installation reminds the viewer of our impermanence and constant change, just like Nature.



*Remembering* see page 81



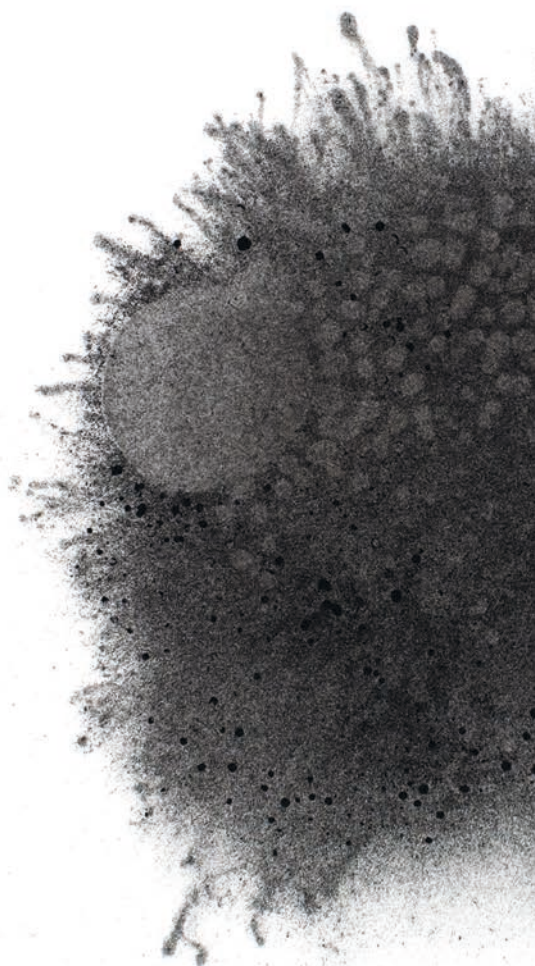
**THESIS WORK**



## WHISPERING VOID

Throughout history, the invisible force of sound continuously affects and shapes every aspect of our lives. One could even say, we live immersed in a world of sound. On one side, we have the noise produced by airplanes flying over us, traffic running by, sirens and other jarring sounds or what we often call noise. On the other side, the sound of nature and music flows around us which have a far more positive effect on us and have the capacity to inspire and lift us up.<sup>1</sup> Making a distinction between sound that wears us down and sound that rejuvenates us encouraged me to do more research on this unseen energy. Seeing sound may open new perspectives and could shine a light on aspects of life that normally remain hidden. By focusing on sound that rejuvenates, my hope is to create awareness of the beauty that surrounds us.

The series *Whispering Void*, is based on observations of Nature, which is a common way to start my practice. After digging deeper into the subject and doing more experiments, I discovered two volumes, written by the Swiss physician and natural scientist Hans Jenny, which are very detailed and richly documented publications on what effect sound has on physical matter. He documented his experiments very precisely and named it after the ancient Greek *ta kytmatica* meaning *matters related to waves*, to describe acoustic effects of sound wave phenomena.<sup>2</sup> But one of the first person who discovered the sound phenomena was Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni. The sand figures, where sand sprinkled on metal plates form graphic patterns by the vibrations of, for example, a violin bow, are named after him.<sup>3</sup>





Just as in scientific experiments, various wave motions can be found in natural phenomena and technology. Among these motions, sound, light, or radio waves are all examples of wave phenomena processing different physical natures, having different causes. But to understand the phenomena of sound, it is important to understand what vibrations and the motion of waves are since sound is a wave motion. It is therefore necessary to describe shortly the characteristics of both phenomena. The pendulum suspended on a thread is a classic example to describe the notion of what vibration means. The periodic movements from a state of equilibrium to the swinging movements, are called free vibrations or natural oscillation. When the energy that causes the vibrations are not sustained, the movement will stop.<sup>4</sup>

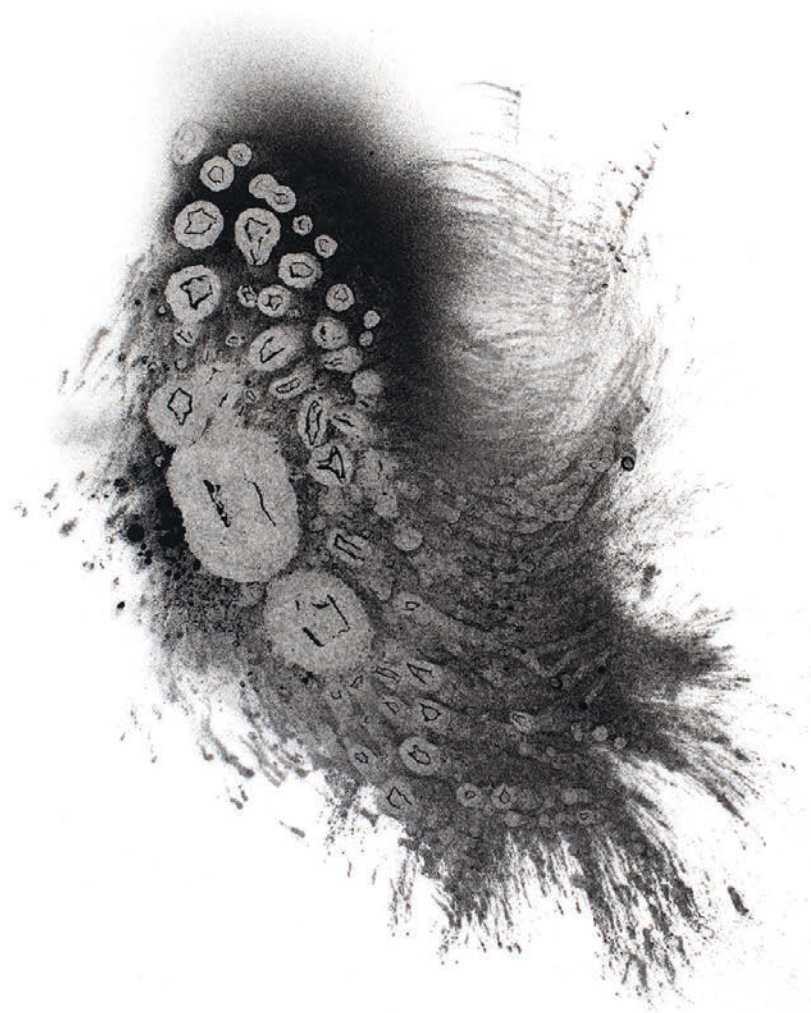
A distinction is made when the oscillation is influenced by external forces which act independently of the oscillations in the system itself. In this case, we talk about forced oscillation. The way the external forces are applied, creates resonance. In other words, resonance describes the relationship between the forced vibration and the natural frequencies of the system. Resonance is very important in nature and technology. The chain bridge that collapsed during the Napoleonic Wars in Spain, is a famous example that states this.<sup>5</sup>

In the preceding section, the single pendulum describes the notion of vibration of a single body. But when several pendulums are connected, vibration will act differently. In this case, every single pendulum will depend on the vibration of the motion of the others and is called wave motion. A basic quantity of a wave or wave motion, is determined by the wave length. The wave length is the distance between any two points of a wave which are mutually in phase.

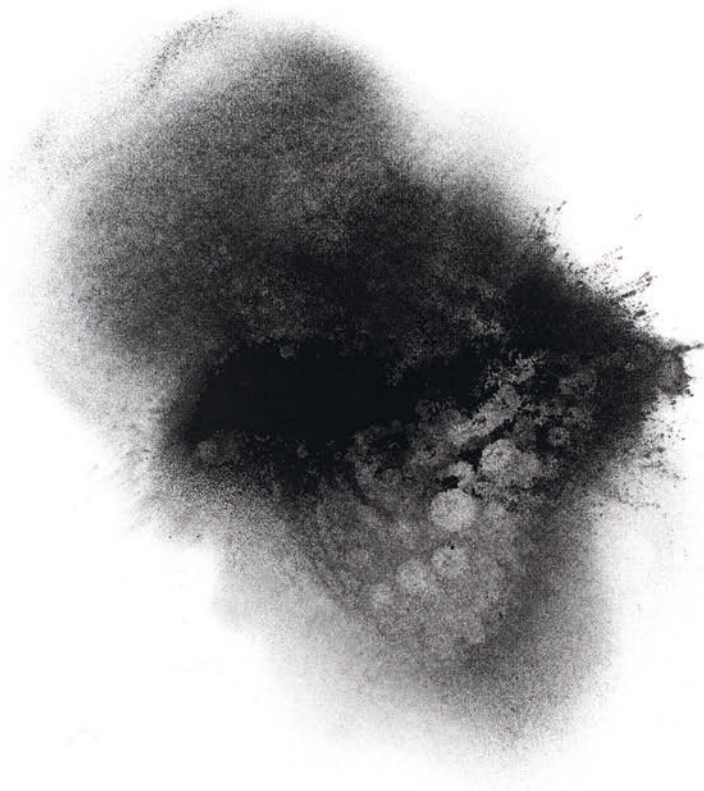
Having a better understanding of waves and vibrations leads us to the concept of sound waves.

Since sound waves usually originate in air, which possesses just as other gasses three-dimensional elasticity, we may define sound waves as waves travelling in gases, liquids, and solids which have been produced by vibrating bodies.<sup>6</sup>

Although we learned that sound or music travels in waves and sound may be heard but not been seen. In my attempt to make the unseen energy visible, the images showed that the graphic form of sound and the physical form are completely different.



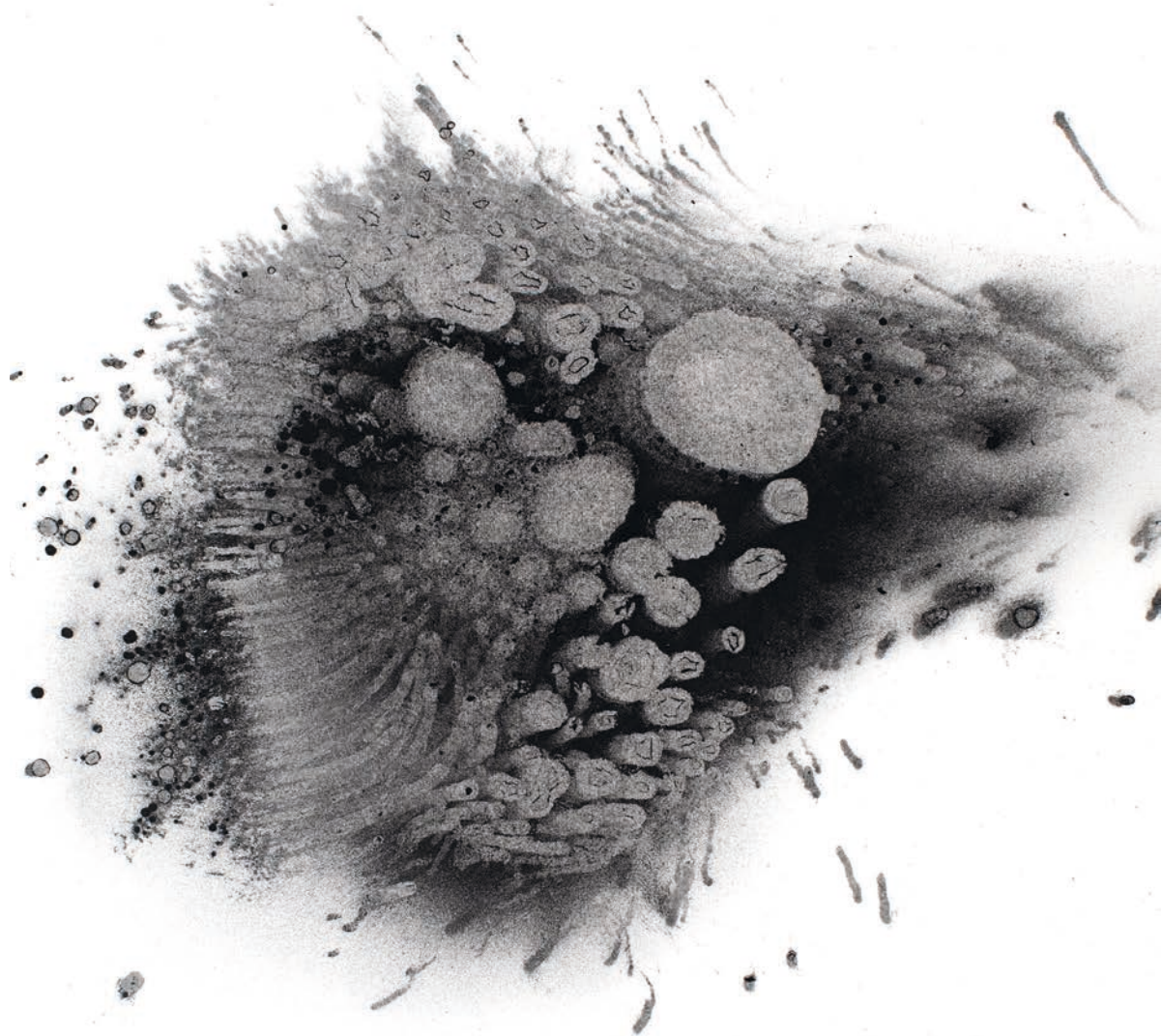


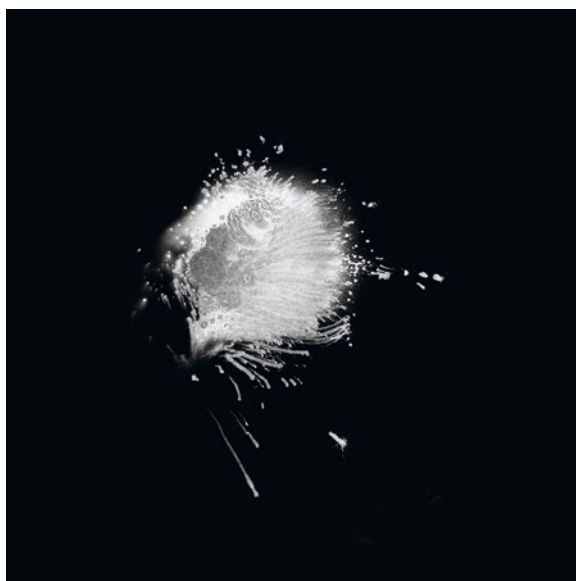


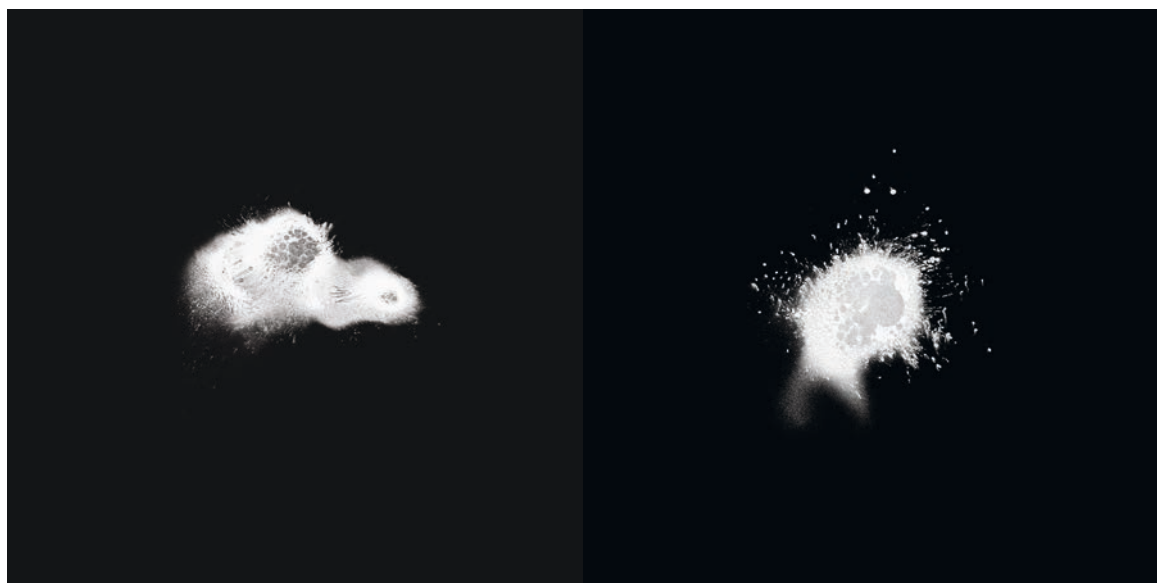
During my practice, just like moving dust sprinkled on the surface of a desk reveals light, I sprinkle charcoal on the surface of paper. As the paper is mounted on an active sound speaker, the powder pulsates in and out, on the rhythm of the music and thus leaves patterns on the papers' surface. Depending on the used sound or music, different configurations remain visible on the paper. Since I use charcoal powder, it is possible to register the figures that are created by the vibrations. Depending on the amplitude of the sound, the drawings vary and leaves different biomorphic shapes. I started to experimenting with sound oscillations and its effects on milk and water since sound waves manifest beside air on liquids also. The influence of acoustic wave fields on liquids reveal dynamic figures shaping the fluid mass. Mounting a bath filled with water on an active sound speaker activates the motion of the waves. During the observation of the water in the water bath, one may notice that the obstacles the sound waves encounter on their path diffract. This bending of the waves creates diffraction patterns.

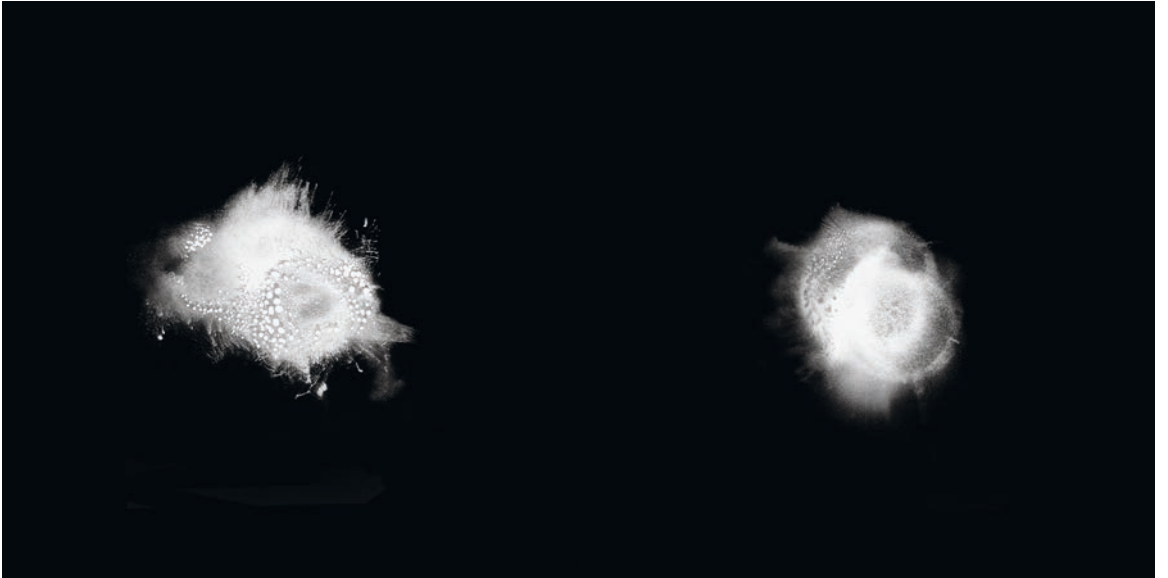




















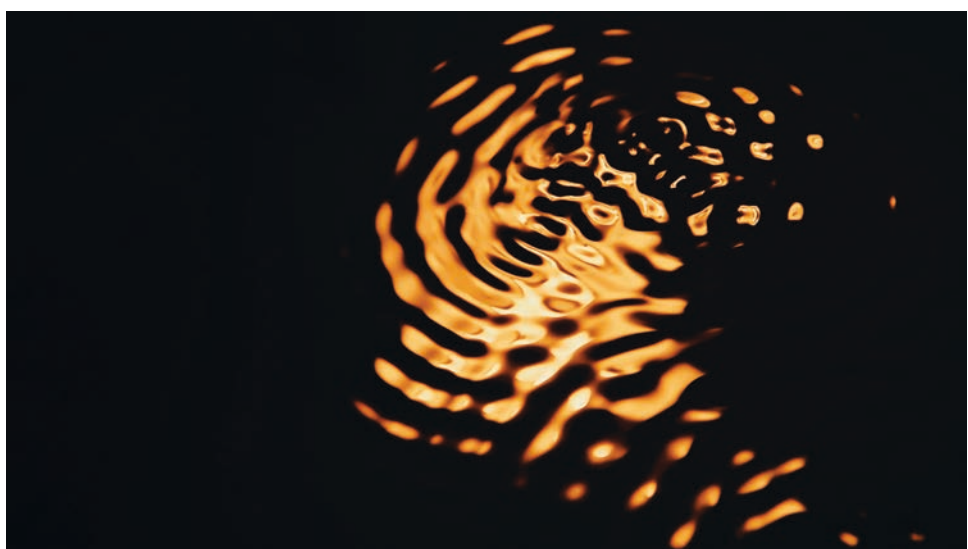
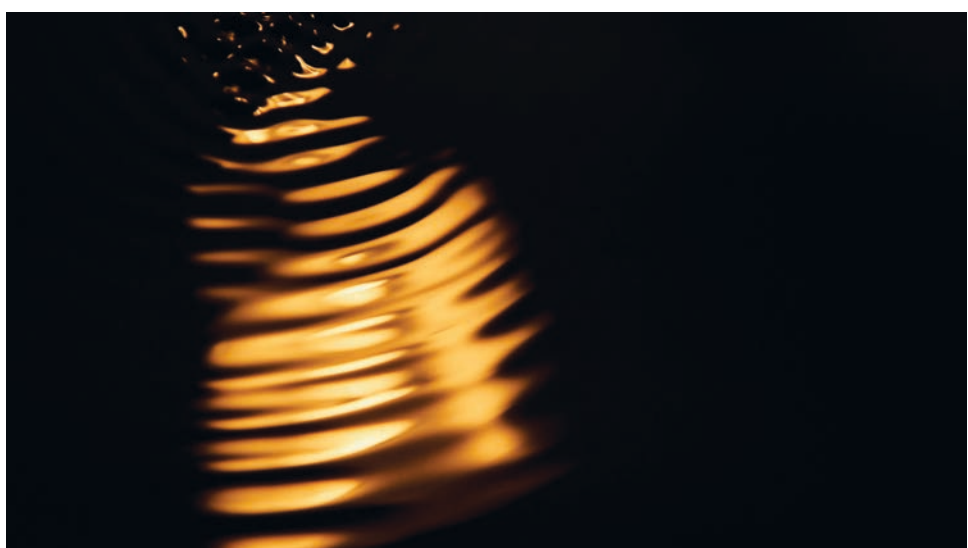
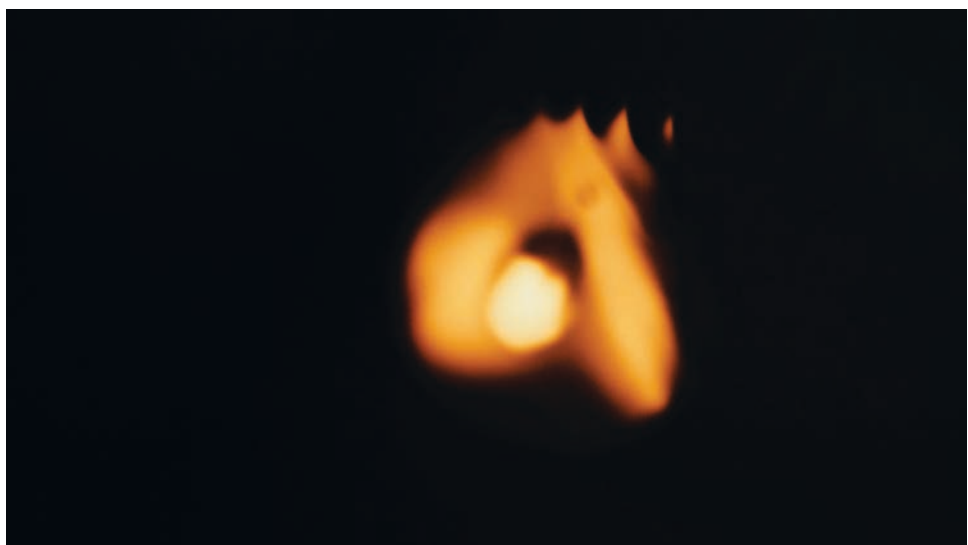


For the making of the drawings, I did experiments with all different kinds of sounds.

Consequently, I opted to work with sounds from astrophysics to zoology and instrumental music, along with the insides that sciences of sound or Cymatics offers today. Using sounds produced by nature is a way to learn how they do things and how to survive in a world hidden from our view.

The ocean and the atmosphere are filled with sounds. Underwater sound, for example, is generated by a variety of different sources such as sound made by marine animals. Marine mammals, such as whales, produce sounds over a wide frequency range from less than 10 Hz. to over 100,000 Hz., depending on the species. Marine mammals use and rely on sound to communicate, navigate and obtain information about their surroundings.<sup>7</sup>





Including particular sounds from various sources attempts to inspire and imagine underwater life, but also could raise questions on how sound made by human activity such as drilling may endanger the life of underwater species.

During the exhibition, the sound piece installed in the Immersive Gallery integrates undersea sounds combined with field recordings in nature and sounds recorded by NASA.





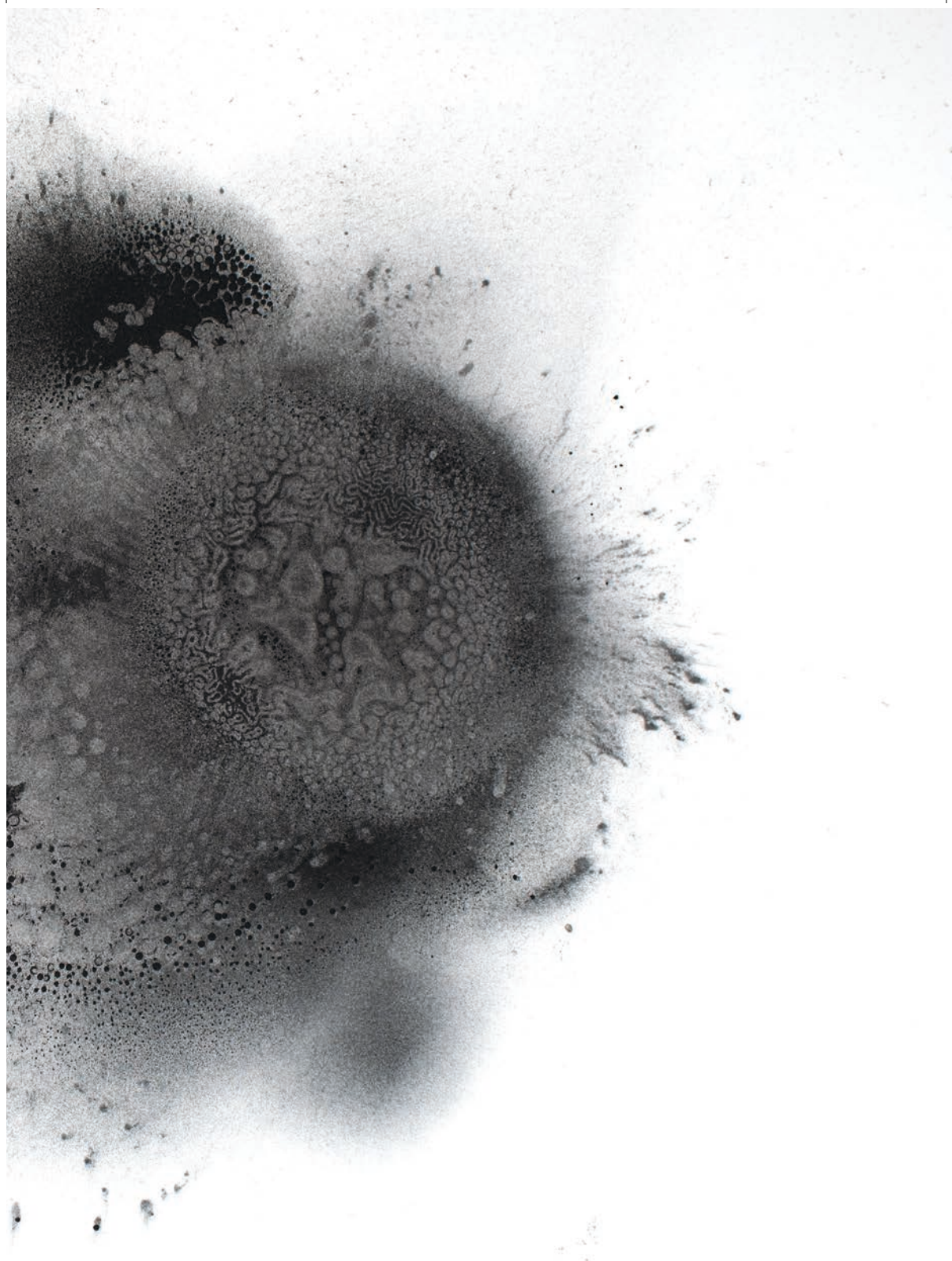






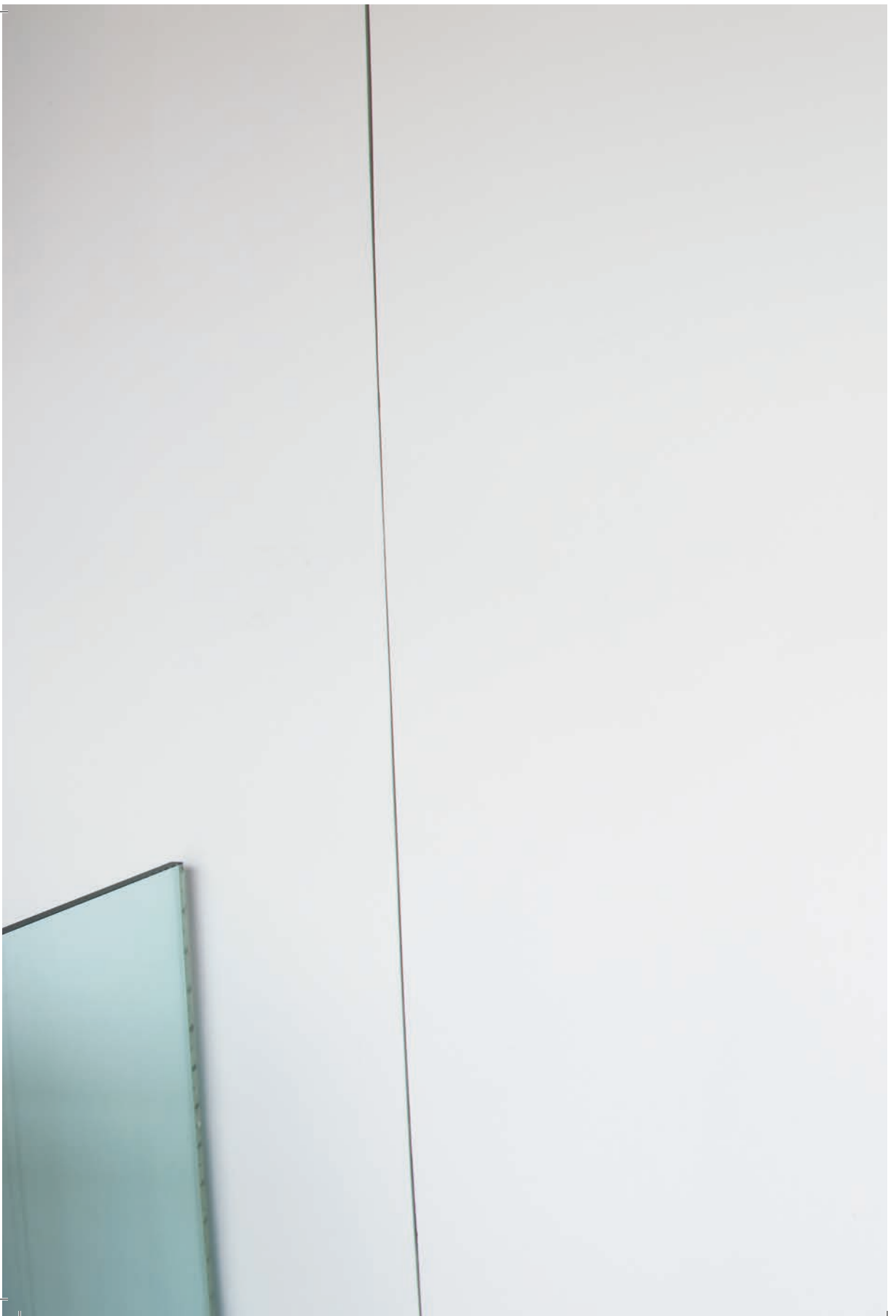






## THE EXHIBITION

Although my method is very defined, I opted to choose a more poetic title for the series, attempting to provoke curiosity and leave room for imagination.

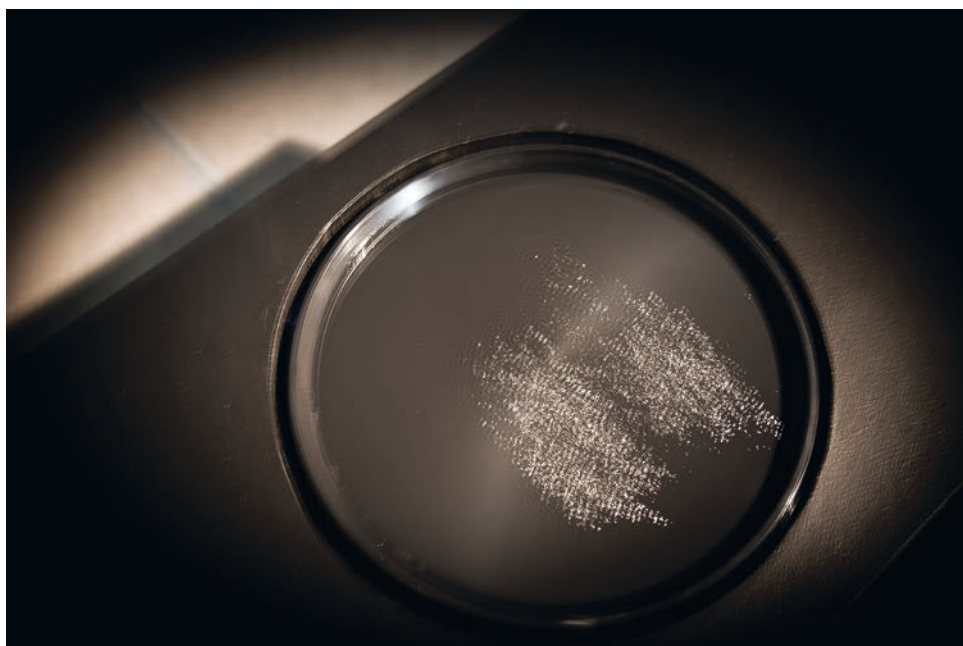


Two vertical metal rods, possibly part of a door handle or a sculpture, are positioned on the left side of the image. They are made of a polished, reflective material, likely brass or stainless steel, and are set against a plain white background. The rods are parallel to each other and extend from the bottom towards the top of the frame.

# WHISPERING VOID

Sound Piece by  
Michèle Sennesael

**PLEASE ENTER  
AND SHUT THE  
DOOR BEHIND YOU**





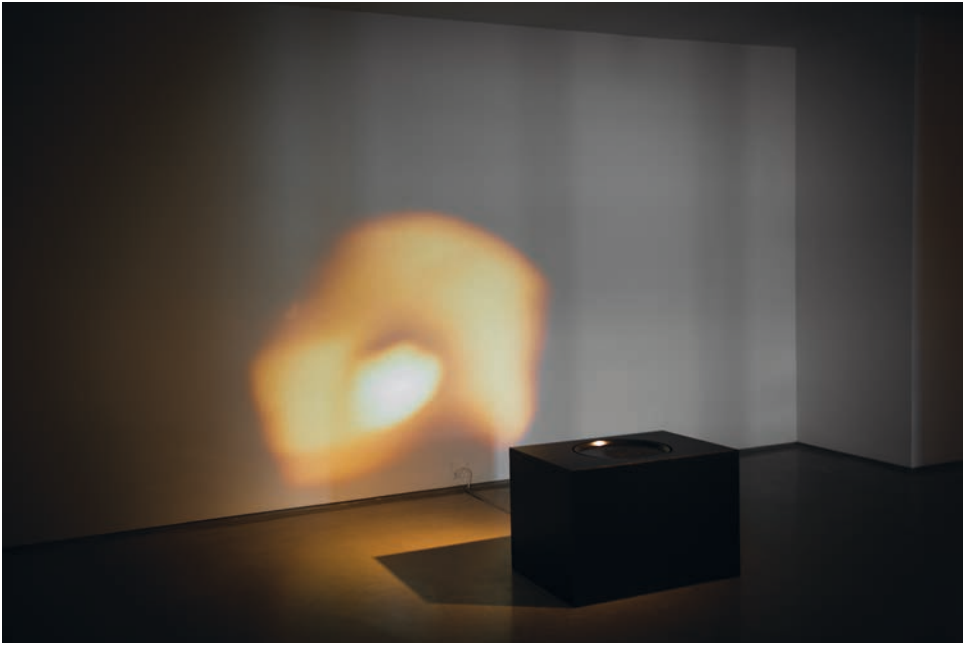














































## **OTHER WORKS**

## A MATTER OF TIME

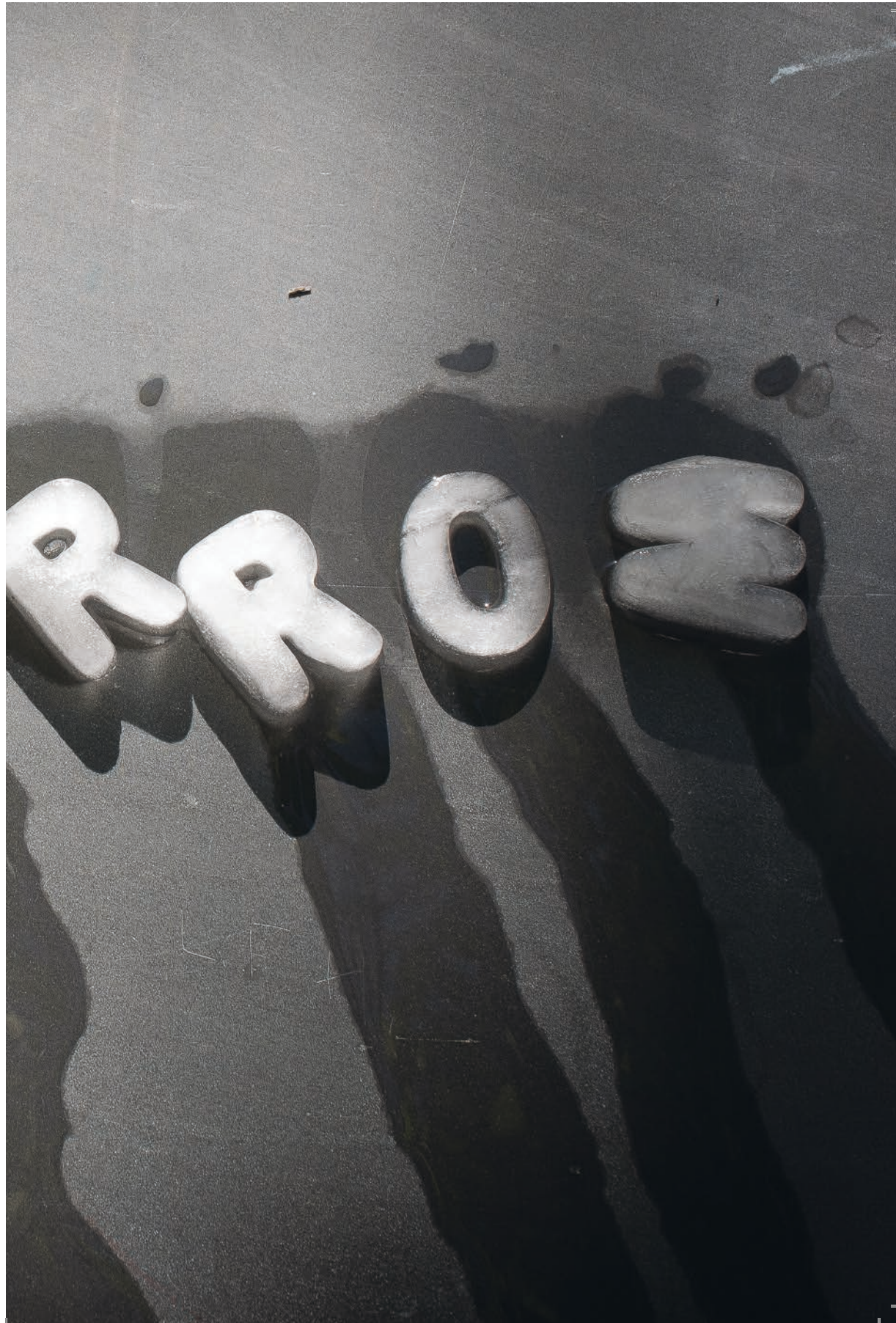
*A Matter of Time* is a video installation, showing the word *Tomorrow*, made of ice cubes. It suggests that the concept of time has lost all meaning in the unconscious world. At the end of the video, when all letters are melted away, an ant crawls over the surface. A subtle detail representing decay, symbolizing death and its relation with time. The ice, melting away, suggests the distortion of space and the passage of time. Once the letters disappeared, a trace is left on the surface. Just like memory, this trace indicates the potential to persist despite the breakdown or distortion of time. This piece may raise awareness to climate change but also refer to consciousness about time and encourages one to live in the moment.





TOMO







## CHASED BY TIME

*Chased by Time* is a video/sound piece, showing a scene of ants, crawling over a dead cockroach. Meanwhile, the crawling ants push and pull the dead animal counter clockwise. Each time the direction of the cockroach changes, the sound of a clock, ticking in the background, changes.

The footage for the video *Chased by Time* was shot during the artist residency at Lugar a Dudas in Cali, Colombia, during the summer of 2018. Working in Colombia had a big impact on my work and way of thinking. Colombia's turbulent and violent history made me once more realize the impact of political situations on the way people perceive daily life. As a consequence, for Colombians, death has a different connotation, then in other parts in Northern America. Spending most of the time outside and the direct contact with nature during the residency, had another impact on my way of perceiving reality.

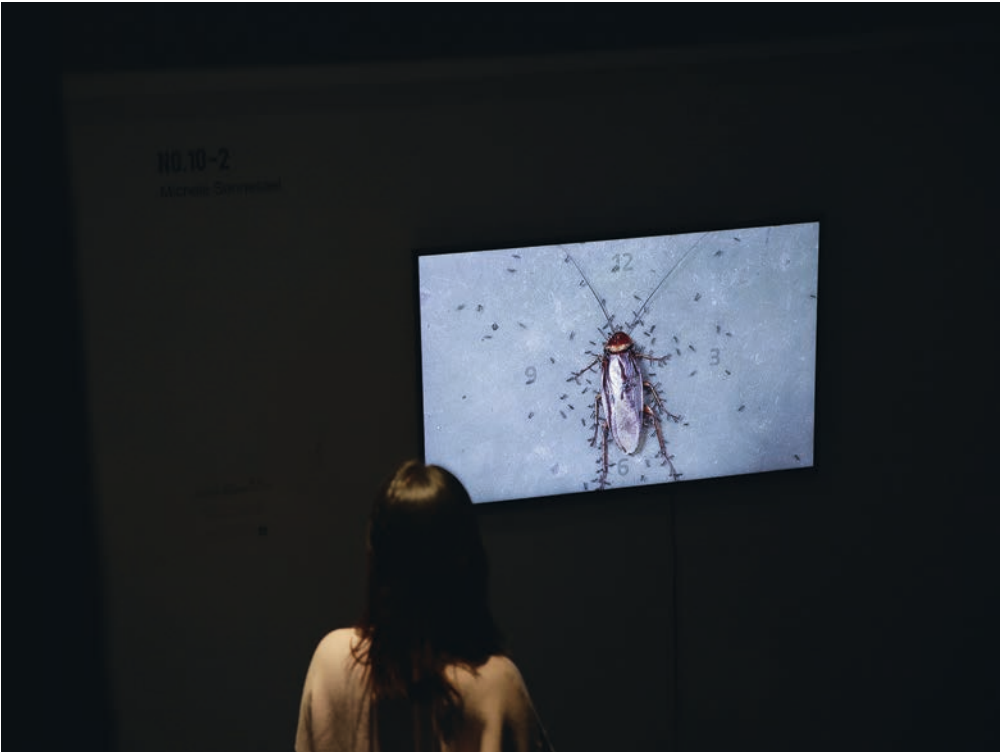
The ants crawling over the cockroach, act as a metaphor for our daily acts in life. They can be seen as humans, the cockroach as death. The ants moving the cockroach could invoke decay and death and its relationship with time. The clock and the erratic movements, refer to humans 'unconscious fear of death. The numbers in the background and the sound create a kind of morbid clock. It is as if there is still time remaining but meanwhile the impossibility to have a grip on time is expressed.

NO.10-2

Michele Sennesael













NO. 10-2

Michael S. Schwartz

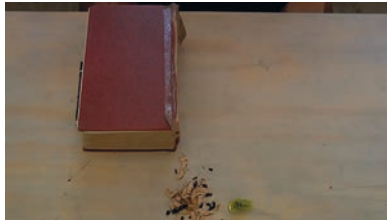




## REWRITING THE FUTURE

The piece *Rewriting the Future* consists of a video, documenting the action of erasing the content of an encyclopedic dictionary. The action is the result of a critical attitude towards the content of historical source material. During the act of erasing the text, the artist questions the parameters that were used for the included words and why others remain excluded. The pages of the deconstructed book are placed on a wall. By reframing the pages of the deconstructed book and place them on a wall, the artist, imagines new work, in a new context.



















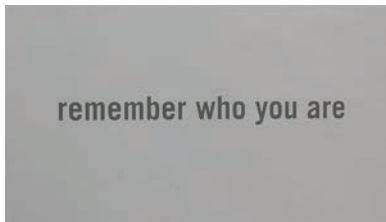
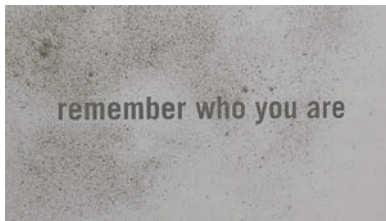


## REMEMBERING

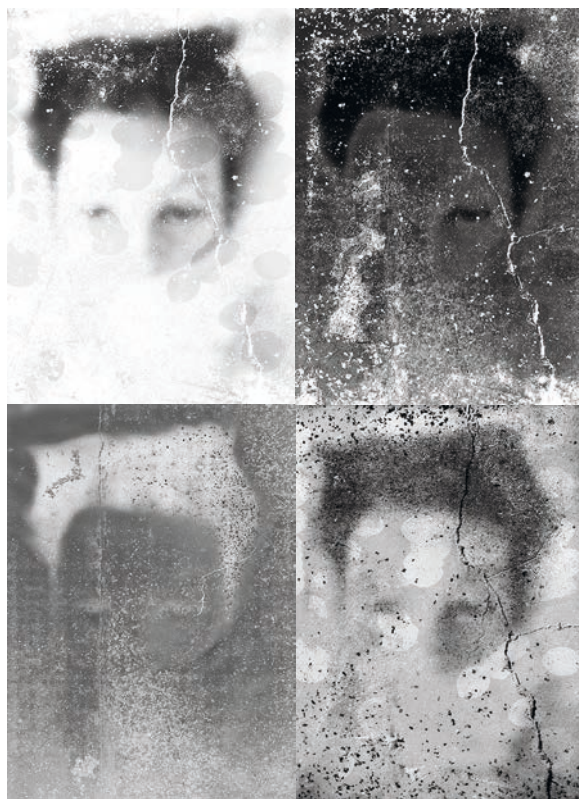
*Remembering* examines the loss of cultural identity, caused by demographic movement. The act of reconstructing and collecting memories attempts to get a better understanding of the sense of reality in the present moment. By remembering moments of the past, the present reality transforms into a new understanding of present reality.

The installation explores memories of the self through images, which represent a collection of abstract memories from the past in order to reconstruct itself. I decided to work through memory, using images that articulate the traumatic recognition of time as an eternal act of creation and of destruction. Throughout the time of making and investigation, I examined possible interactions and connections between sound, stills, video, different kind of papers and fabric, to define the process of remembering. While making this piece, the investigation was more important than the representation of memory. Different techniques and materials define and represent the process of reconstruction.





While creating this work, I researched and focused on memory from a philosophers' perspective. Many philosophers have studied and written about memory. Henri Bergson wrote in his essay *Matter and Memory*, about the relation and the reality of mind and matter. In order to find a relation between one and the other, he studied memory as he considered it diverged mind and matter. Following Henri-Louis Bergson, the brain is an organ of choice, that functions as a filter for mental images. Through consciousness, thoughts, impressions or ideas with a practical role are filtered. In An introduction to *Metaphysics*, Bergson expands on the central role of intuition, which is at the same time to starting point to create this piece.







The installation *Remembering* (video, print, sound) explores the notion of the unknown. It aims to mirror memories into the future, by remembering something that hasn't happened yet. Thinking about the future is an important part of being human. Text is used to visualize the future, imagining what will happen and how we will react. When we think about the future we do the same mental work as when we remember. We just remember a future that hasn't happened yet. Therefore, remembering the past and the future are deeply connected.

A video is projected through a veil, on a wall. The projected images merge slowly into each other, while the same image never reappears. The image or memory becomes an action similar to the act of time that passes by.

In this installation, new digital techniques are combined with the old (memories) and new, to deconstruct the present. It results in digital versions of images on glass plates. The different sizes represent the sense of differentness to ourselves over time.

On the floor, the words remember who you are, slowly appear and disappear. To invoke both the states of the process and sublimation, dust has been used to reveal the text.

The prints that are hanging on the ceiling, appear like shadows on a wall.

To expand the interaction of the video, a fan creates the optical illusion, blowing away the dust on the floor, which moves the veil, this to make another reference with the perception of time. Aiming to excite all the viewers senses, the veil was sprayed with a smell and a mysterious, undefined sound fills the space. The video, projected on the wall, is envisioned to be projected on top of a curtain you can walk through, representing a gateway to another to the other side/the future.

## REACHING THROUGH THE OTHER SIDE

*Reaching Through the Other Side*, consists of a series of photographs. Each photograph is constructed from two different images layered on top of each other. The works talk about migration, as a global phenomenon which is growing in scope, complexity and impact.

Skimming through our national media or tuning into political speeches, most people would recognize that the debate over immigration reform is more characterized by populist scaremongering than by its rich philosophical insights. Words like “foreigner”, “illegal”, “stranger” are normative, yet are hardly applied with critical rigor. Meanwhile, fundamental questions of human liberty and dignity are debated by a flawed democratic political system. Migration in the modern world raises more fundamental questions than ‘should these people be here’: it probes into the richness of what it means to be human, as well how we define our communities. For centuries, philosophers from Immanuel Kant to Michael Walzer debated questions of freedom of movement, state coercion and belonging. For Walzer, the link between philosophy and migration is primarily one of how migration shapes philosophical thought in a way that enriches society. Living in a country other than the one of birth, offers the opportunity of seeing the vulnerable self, mirrored through the eyes and responses of another people and of exploring the ways that one’s culture defines one’s being.

















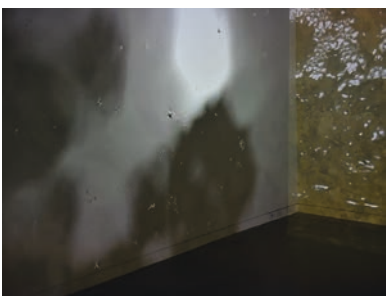
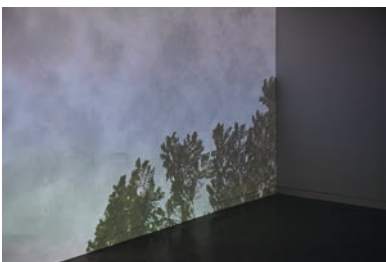
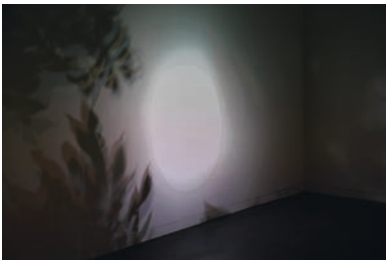




## INTO THE LIGHT

The footage for the video, *Into the Light*, was recorded during the summer of 2017 in Alfred, New York. Close-up images of the sun, reflections in the water and natural scenes aim to bring the viewer into a certain atmosphere. The audio is a mix of field recordings in nature and simple electronic sounds. In a separate room, a data moshed landscape, is displayed on a stack of monitors.





















## UNDEFINED BEAUTY

*Undefined Beauty* is a long-term, award-winning series (Photographer of the Year 2017), I started during a residency in Upstate New York. The images aim to shine a light on the unseen beauty that surrounds us. The photographs are visual poems, informed by nature and personal life-based experiences. They may express one's inner reality and maintain a tension between reality and illusion. Although these images were created just before my I started studying at Alfred University, including them into this book is important, since it was the starting point of my new way of seeing.







## CONCLUSION

The series *Whispering Void* triggered my interest in the hidden powers of sound. It changed my perception of my surroundings, where I started to see not through my eyes but with my ears. Using different mediums allows to experience how sound, nature and technology come together. Parallel to technology, the use of science in art can help to describe the world around us and get a better understanding of it.

This body of work is a starting point to make new work. It paves a way for further investigations, experiments and use of new media. Changing our perception in combination with the use of new musical interfaces will help me to let the audience experience the unseen power of sound. If we are able to shift our perception, we can learn how sound can be used as a tool to expand our level of consciousness. It may help us to understand how sound may impact the mind and body in our daily lives.<sup>8</sup>

The experiments made for the series *Whispering Void* illustrate the basic principles of vibrational medicine. To get an understanding of this principle, I refer to Hans Jenny's way of perceiving our human bodies or unified energy fields or wholes or unified energy fields. To capture this, we should metaphorically compare our physical body, with the matter (charcoal in my experiments) to create cymatic forms. Instead of using the speaker to create oscillation it gets animated by underlying fields such as our thoughts and emotions or what we call an energy field. Sound therapy can be used to restore the balance of this field. Hans Jenny wanted to let us understand that all his experiments were based on the principles of the whole or the universal principles of nature. If we understand these, we can heal our bodies by using the vibrations of sound. These ideas are not new. For thousands of years, indigenous cultures used sound as a tool to expand their consciousness for personal growth and healing. After investigating the energy field of a person, they used various sound therapies to restore the unbalanced energy field. They understood we are not isolated beings but connected to all of creation. Scientists use the term *biophilia* to describe this. It refers to the idea that humans possess an instinctive biological bond between themselves and other living systems.



Today we know more about sound science than ever before so it is time to tune in, elevate our wellbeing and transform ourselves. If we embrace nature and start to think like eco-psychologists, we can not only heal our mind but also restore the earth.

We just have to remember, listen and learn.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dyson, Frances. *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*. (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2009), 136-139.

<sup>2</sup> Jenny Hans, *Cymatics, A Study of Wave Phenomena and Vibration*. (Newmarket, New Hampshire, 2001), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Jenny, *Cymatics, A Study of Wave Phenomena and Vibration*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Krasil'nikov V.A. *Sound and Ultrasound Waves in Air, Water and Solid Bodies*. (Washington D.C.: Israel Program for Science Translations Jerusalem, 1963), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Krasil'nikov, *Sound and Ultrasound Waves in Air, Water and Solid Bodies*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Krasil'nikov *Sound and Ultrasound Waves in Air, Water and Solid Bodies*, 11-25.

<sup>7</sup> WJ Richardson, CR Greene Jr, CI Malme, DH Thomson. *Marine Mammals and Noise*. (Academic Press 1995), 15-26.

<sup>8</sup> Jenny, *Cymatics, A Study of Wave Phenomena and Vibration*, 12-13.

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[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=j6bYBAAQ-BAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=W.+J.+Richardson,+C.+R.+Green,+Jr.,+C.+I.+Malme,+and+D.+H.+Thompson,+Marine+Mam-mals+and+Noise+\(Academic+Press,+San+Diego,+2001\).&ots=BaRwCnfx-Ud&sig=slw-Gi2Buh61S9uxKxELJMNqDaA#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=j6bYBAAQ-BAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=W.+J.+Richardson,+C.+R.+Green,+Jr.,+C.+I.+Malme,+and+D.+H.+Thompson,+Marine+Mam-mals+and+Noise+(Academic+Press,+San+Diego,+2001).&ots=BaRwCnfx-Ud&sig=slw-Gi2Buh61S9uxKxELJMNqDaA#v=onepage&q&f=false)

## Technical Notes

### HARDWARE

Apple iMac Pro  
Apple Mac Mini  
Audioengine 2+ Premium Powered Desktop Speaker  
Epilog Legend 36EXT Laser  
Epson iPF6400 Printer  
MedeaWiz DV-S1 Sprite Looping HD Media Player  
Mimaki TS30-1300 Textile Transfer Inkjet Printer  
Nikon D750  
Panasonic HC-VX1EB-K 4K Ultra HD Camcorder  
T amplifier  
W1000 BenQ HD Projector

### SOFTWARE

Adobe Photoshop Lightroom CC 2015  
Adobe Photoshop CC 2017  
Adobe InDesign CC 2017  
Adobe Premiere Pro CC 2017  
Adobe Audition CC 2017

### MATERIALS

Chinese Star 3 Ply paper  
Powdered Charcoal

## ADVISING COMMITTEE

Joseph Scheer: chair  
Peer Bode  
Xiaowen Chen

## SPECIAL THANKS TO

Alicia Candiani  
Andrés Monzón  
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Mark Klingensmith  
Peer Bode  
Rebekkah Palov  
William Contino  
Xiaowen Chen

2019 MFA Thesis Exhibition  
Electronic Integrated Arts  
Black Box digital immersion space for interactive arts  
Fosdick-Nelson Gallery  
TSI Snodgrass New Media Gallery  
School of Art and Design  
NYSCC at Alfred University  
14802 Alfred, NY

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