

# Large Text

## 2021 MVS Studio Program Graduating Exhibition

Works by Oscar Alfonso, Simon Fuh,  
Matt Nish-Lapidus, and Sophia Oppel

October 27–November 20, 2021  
Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

Architecture and Design Gallery  
Daniels Building  
University of Toronto  
1 Spadina Crescent  
Toronto, ON M5S 2J5

Online at [visualstudies.net](http://visualstudies.net)

Art  
Museum

# 2021 University of Toronto MVS Studio Program Graduating Exhibition

In partnership with the Art Museum, the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design at the University of Toronto is pleased to exhibit the graduating projects of the 2021 Master of Visual Studies students Oscar Alfonso, Simon Fuh, Matt Nish-Lapidus, and Sophia Oppel. The virtual exhibition, which can be viewed at [visualstudies.net](http://visualstudies.net), documents the work by Fuh, Nish-Lapidus, and Oppel presented in the Daniels Building and its Architecture and Design Gallery, and acts as a portal to Oscar Alfonso's reading-performances and digital publication.

The graduate exhibition is funded and produced as part of the requirements for the MVS degree in Studio at the John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design, University of Toronto.

## **Our Supporters**

The exhibition is generously supported by The Valerie Jean Griffiths Student Exhibitions Fund in Memory of William, Elva, and Elizabeth.

# Foreword

*“Tell me, as if I were lost”*

A deceptively simple prompt initiates Simon Fuh’s spare installation *Memory Theatre* (2021): on a phone call, he asks a friend to recall his path to a dance club on the outskirts of Glasgow, with the caveat, “Tell me, as if I were lost.” It’s a complex request. Not only does his friend have to recount streets and buildings in detail, he is encouraged to do so while prognosticating a kind of memory mastery that will guide a disoriented Fuh safely to his illusory destination. The projection of this “as if” entreats a multi-dimensional shift between conjecture and memory, asking the speaker to imagine inhabiting the listener’s position while choosing language that will put them on a good course. It is an appeal for an ethical response—in asking, Fuh is asking for care in, and of, his illegibility.

In the bare interior room of *Memory Theatre*, audio playback of this conversation, mixed with house music, is embedded in a wall. As visitors crane their necks to hear, placing one ear against the wall, plugging the other with a finger, they strain to comprehend. It is a move many of us have done countless times while high at a club. Channeled through voice, this space for replicating sense-memory ironically invites us to project into a social exchange that doesn’t include us. Fuh’s built environment charges this paradoxical relation between immersion and alienation—inside, outside—where self is lost until related through another.

This calling outward to find the self via a proxy voice characterizes each artist project in this year’s MVS Graduating Exhibition. The installations of Simon Fuh, Matt Nish-Lapidus,

and Sophia Oppel, and the collected story project of Oscar Alfonso, all include processed versions of the artist's own voice transmuted through distortion, translation, and computational programming. However augmented and displaced, each artist's voice returns as a generative interlocutor of their subjectivities, the result of—not in spite of—these transformational aesthetic strategies. Of course, each of these projects developed through two academic years impacted by a pandemic that has mediated communication through online meetings, phone calls, emails, texts, chat, and social media posts. Contra to a detached and skeptical dystopianism, these projects consider our present techno-social deferral through nuanced attempts to sit in ethical relation with distance.

In a collection of stories, *No estoy seguro en nuestros nombres / I'm not sure I remember all of our names* (2021), Oscar Alfonso caringly processes questions of place and displacement, loss and resilience, contact and privacy, language and its interpretation. Variable in form—a limited-edition print publication, a website, and video-based readings by the artist—his work, like Fuh's, begins from a distanced request. Working from Mexico City, Oscar Alfonso invited family, friends, lovers, and colleagues living in various cities to address avocado seedlings he grew during the pandemic. Many of the resulting intimate letters, poems, and personal histories, sent or told to the artist in English and Spanish and translated by him for the bilingual compilation, begin with the address, "Dear Avocado, / Querido Aguacate,". Likely originating in central Mexico, the avocado tree offers the artist and his collaborators a complicated metaphor: a rhetorical device to conceptualize the fraught-ness of self in connection to histories of colonization and its intergenerational affects. Though the avocado trees don't speak back, their hard silence reverberates with the voices

projected onto them—Oscar Alfonso’s project is to tend these words.

Because Oscar Alfonso’s transmedia project allows several points of access, it is experienced through interpretative guidance—the artist’s editing, translation, reading—that forecloses a totality. This guidance is a charged act of withholding that conversely enlivens the work—asking for projection and compelling the suspicion of our understanding. Filtered through his translation, this inversion of “direct address” is paralleled in both the hieroglyphics of Matt Nish-Lapidus’s *A Path* (2021) and the contested legibility central to Sophia Opper’s *being both opened up and flattened* (2021).

Intersecting Nish-Lapidus’s installation of five works created through the eloquent reimagining of computational programming histories, the four-channel audio work *Breath from Breath* (2020–21) features the artist’s voice dissected phonetically. Glottal stops and aspirations are reassembled and combined with ambient field recordings through audio synthesis and algorithmic composition software. Heard through speakers connected by excessive spools of reverse-engineered ethernet cable running from an oversized equipment rack, Nish-Lapidus’s machine voice hovers at the edge of meaning, nearly forming comprehensible utterances, and then retreating. Enveloping the cryptic multi-part installation, *Breath from Breath* acts as one of many contiguous elements that quicken a compulsion to participate in the puzzle the artist provides us. In *A Path*, the seduction of coding and decoding—the pleasure of deciphering a position in relation—emerges fully engaged with the emancipatory roots of computation. Working through ideas central to early heuristic pedagogies of computer programming, Nish-Lapidus offers a brazen institutional critique of our current,

dangerously innocuous relationship with communication technology.

Like *A Path*, Sophia Oppel's *being both opened up and flattened* (2021) eschews the passivity of our present, technologically mediated human relation. Working with, instead of against, applications and apparatuses that characterize immersive contemporary media culture, Oppel's oppositional critique provides a space of material contradiction organized so as to mute coercive accelerationism and surveillance capital. Here, stepping onto low-impact exercise mats, bathed by artificial lights engineered to combat seasonal affective disorder, and facing a grid of two-way mirrors housed in a steel frame, we hear Oppel's voice focusing our attention. We are cued where to look, where to move, and with suggestions of how to feel. This surrender to a directive is initially surfeited by the alluring material rhetoric of the installation—miming consumption and capitulation to the products of self-care regimes, shopping mall displays, information kiosks, bank tellers, and airport screening areas; Oppel's voice is equal parts instructional voice-over, guided mediation, and commercial advertisement. However, this piling up of signifiers consciously undermines an integrity of form: as her narrative progresses, altered in speed, filtered in pitch, the authority of her voice erodes and the performer embedded in this recording surfaces more fallible, more lost, more human.

Jean-Paul Kelly

Director of Visual Studies

John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape, and Design

## Oscar Alfonso

### ***No estoy seguro en nuestros nombres / I'm not sure I remember all of our names***

Presented in English and Spanish, *No estoy seguro en nuestros nombres / I'm not sure I remember all of our names* is the result of a year-long collaborative process anchored by the small cluster of avocado trees that have kept me company. As a way of exploring queer and migrant ideas of kinship and inheritance, the project invited over 200 of my relations to share a story—a piece of “knowledge”—that they would like to pass on to the Avocados. Relations were guided to respond to one or more avocado themes: obsolescence, stationariness, expectations, travel, and diaspora. The resulting eighty exchanges include letters, reflections, fiction, poems, and textual experiments that bring us together through a web platform, a live reading, and a limited-edition book. For now and forever, our children they will be.

Presentado en inglés y español, *No estoy seguro en nuestros nombres / I'm not sure I remember all of our names* surge de un proceso colaborativo durante el año previo, anclado en un huertito de arbolitos de aguacate que me han acompañado. Como una forma de explorar ideas queer y migratorias de herencia y parentesco, invite al proyecto a más de 200 de mis relaciones a compartir un cuento — una pieza de ‘conocimiento’ — que quisieran heredar a los Aguacates, las relaciones fueron guiadas a responder a uno o más temáticas de los aguacates: la obsolescencia, la estacionariedad, la expectativa, el viaje, y la diáspora, los intercambios resultantes incluyen cartas, reflexiones, ficción, poemas, y experimentos escritos que nos juntan a través de una versión digital, una lectura en vivo, y un libro en edición limitada. Por ahora y para siempre, nuestros peques serán.



## **About the Artist**

Oscar Alfonso works with text, digital media, and installations. Born en La Ciudad de México and raised in Vancouver, Oscar Alfonso's practice focuses on reconstructing a relationship to home. He is currently reflecting on what it means to "be away" and on who is not here.

# Simon Fuh

## *Memory Theatre*

In 2019, I threw a brief series of parties in my hometown, Regina, Saskatchewan, that left me wondering whether it was possible for me to relive them, or desirable to try to recreate them. During the alienation of the COVID-19 pandemic, I reached out to my friends and colleagues with questions first about parties, and then about memory. A party, I thought, is much like a memory: evasive, and ungraspable unless experienced directly.

*Memory Theatre* is a two-part multi-channel immersive sound installation that takes influence from this conundrum. A thirty-foot-tall near pitch-black room houses the ambient sound of a walk through the city at night. Within that cavernous space, a twelve-foot by twelve-foot box or room within a room, houses a second sound installation that plays from speakers embedded inside the walls. A recorded conversation over the phone plays in this room against the backdrop of thumping dance music: “Yo,” says one person, “I’m lost.” “So you need to get to Checkmate?” says the other. A long meandering description of how to get to the club unfolds, followed by another long description of the club’s interior, including various opinions and details of the space and attendees.

Taking advantage of sound’s embodied and affective potential, *Memory Theatre* makes a site out of an impossible psychic space, where the party is always arriving but never reached. An object of lack, the party gives way to the potential of remembering itself.

## **About the Artist**

Simon Fuh is an artist and writer who frequently makes temporary installations and collaborative projects that prod at both the potential and banality of being and thinking together. His research for the past year has focused on social memory and parties—in particular, how remembering together can be its own site for becoming.

# Matt Nish-Lapidus

## *A Path*

Forty years ago, Seymour Papert, along with other computer pioneers, saw the inevitable interrelationship between the emerging personal computer, the culture that created it, and the cultures it would influence. Papert saw the potential for computers to act as humanistic “objects to think with,” devices that allow people to create micro-worlds full of expression, learning, exploration, and joy. At the heart of this vision was a simple yet robust programming language, LOGO, which acted as a lingua franca between the embodied and virtual worlds. LOGO was a language of combination, bricolage, and discovery that allowed children to explore computation through creativity—forging their own paths.

According to the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a Kabbalah book of language mysticism, a “path” is a unique, inner, personal route to wisdom. Different than roads or public walkways, paths are often hidden or obfuscated, forged by each of us as we discover our way through the world. Language is part of the code used to unlock these paths. Kabbalah’s combinatorial language mysticism, in which the universe is created through expressing every possible combination of letters in the alphabet, is a computational system—a functional poetry that simultaneously describes and enacts an ongoing process of recombination and iteration.

Each of the five pieces included in *A Path* are modular, real-time, computational micro-worlds. They combine code, poetry, and language mysticism in software-artworks that meditate on the poetics and material of computation and computer cultures.

## **About the Artist**

Matt Nish-Lapidus is an artist, writer, musician, and designer. He makes software, sounds, and texts probing the myth that computers need to be useful rather than beautiful.

## **Sophia Oppel** ***being both opened up and flattened***

*being both opened up and flattened* deploys transparent substrates—glass, mirror, and the screen—as a framework to consider the paradoxes of legibility under surveillance capitalism. The installation addresses both the complicity with and the refusal of biometric capture on a bodily scale by creating a space of hostile affirmation that implicates the viewer in the process of becoming transparent. Referencing the streamlined, clinical aesthetics of airports and luxury retail establishments, the work explores the perverse desire to participate in the flows of commodified self-image. This installation examines the gradations of transparency from a position of complicit critique and addresses the political and poetic implications of becoming transparent: Who can comfortably inhabit transparency, and in what ways do desires for legibility specifically impact bodies socially coded as feminine?

*being both opened up and flattened* centres around a six-and-a-half-foot by six-foot two-way mirrored divider that catches and refracts projections in tandem with an instructional voiceover. Upon entering the installation, viewers are met with four seasonal affective disorder lights turned up to maximum brightness and mounted to vertical poles on either side of the mirrored divider. The eleven-minute instructional voiceover oscillates among the rhetorics of an airport announcement, guided meditation, and commercial advertisement as it guides the viewer's movements through the space.

## **About the Artist**

Sophia Oppel is an interdisciplinary arts practitioner and researcher interested in examining digital interfaces and physical architectures as parallel sites of power. Oppel deploys transparent substrates—glass, mirror, and the screen—as a framework to consider the paradoxes of legibility under surveillance capitalism.

## From the Artists

**Oscar Alfonso:** A special thanks to all my relations who have come along this journey with me, even if you are not within these pages. Thank you for our time together—for your lessons, your laughter, and for our struggles, our growth. Thank you even if you don't know this, or if we can no longer be in touch. Thank you also to the members of my panel, who have guided me throughout: Maria Hupfield, Sanaz Mazinani, Sue Lloyd, and Tamara Toledo. And thank you especially to my mother, father, and grandmothers, whose patience and knowledge todavía me llevan a lugares desconocidos.

**Simon Fuh:** I'd like to thank Nic Wilson, Brandon Poole, Kate Whiteway, Gareth Long, Matt Nish-Lapidus, Teiji Wallace-Lewis, Jon Vaughn, respectfulchild, Luis Jacob, and Maggie Groat for their guiding conversation and participation in this project. I'd especially like to thank Lillian O'Brien Davis for her continued support, radiant brilliance, and unending patience.

**Matt Nish-Lapidus:** I'd like to sincerely acknowledge the deeply meaningful mentorship I received from my thesis panel: Jean-Paul Kelly, Marla Hlady, Mitchell Akiyama, and Tina Rivers Ryan. Very special thanks to my partner, Camille DePutter, whose ongoing encouragement and collaboration in life makes all of this possible. Thank you to my fellow MVS colleagues for their camaraderie, amazing conversations, and mutual inspiration. And finally, to the extended MVS faculty and staff for their gracious interest, excitement, and support along the way.



**Sophia Oppel:** I would like to thank my advisor, Catherine Telford-Keogh, my panelists, Luis Jacob and Maggie Groat, and my external reader, Jasmine Rault, for their exceptional insight, feedback, and expertise. I am grateful for the support of our director, Jean-Paul Kelly, and my wonderful professors Maria Hupfield and Mitchell Akiyama. I thank Parker Galbraith-Nolan for his incredible metal fabrication and Eric Steele for his installation support. Thank you too to my family and close friends for their love and companionship. Lastly, I'd like to thank my MVS colleagues, who inspire me hugely; I am grateful and humbled to have them as peers.

## From the Faculty

At its core, the Visual Studies program at Daniels is premised on three interrelated features of working in art and its cultural fields: art-making and its exhibition, writing, and public discourse. All radically challenged and altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Amid a time of uncertainty, isolation, and grief—felt, perhaps, collectively but certainly experienced inequitably—the exhibitions produced by the 2021 cohort of MVS students offers a thoughtful presence, one that is caring and critical, reflective and risk-taking. Our congratulations go to Oscar, Simon, Matt, and Sophia, along with our admiration of their vital contributions, their patience and commitment.

MVS graduate faculty who served on thesis panels this year: Maria Hupfield (Oscar Alfonso, Principal Advisor), Jean-Paul Kelly (Nish-Lapidus, Principal Advisor), Gareth Long (Fuh, Principal Advisor), Catherine Telford-Keogh (Oppel, Principal Advisor), Mitchell Akiyama, Maggie Groat, Marla Hlady, Luis Jacob, Sue Lloyd, Sanaz Mazinani, and Charles Stankieveh.

This year marks the first iteration of the MVS Graduating Exhibition to be installed in the Daniels Building and its impressive Architecture and Design Gallery (ADG). During a strict lockdown in Toronto, where public health protocols revised plans for in-person gallery visits, there has been ongoing and dedicated support from the Daniels Faculty administrative and technical staff. In particular, thank you to Mauricio Quiros Pacheco and the Daniels Exhibition Committee; Visual Studies technician Renée Lear; Daniels Manager of Workshops

and Building Services Naveed Khan, Facilities Coordinator Sarah Whitehouse, and Studio Technicians Amy George and Joseph Rogal. A special thanks goes to interim Dean Robert Wright, whose resolution to see these works in the ADG has been exceptional.

The move to the ADG extends our relationship with the Art Museum in new and exciting ways. In our continuing collaboration, Barbara Fischer, Sarah Robayo Sheridan, and the staff have once again offered their platform and generous insight with a spirit of inclusivity. Thank you.

Finally, an enormous thanks to Charles Stankieveh for his 6-years of incisive stewardship of the MVS exhibitions as Visual Studies Director.

# Visiting the Art Museum

## **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery**

7 Hart House Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3  
416-978-8398

## **University of Toronto Art Centre**

15 King's College Circle  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7  
416-978-1838

### **Hours**

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

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Admission is FREE.

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