

Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary

After Nature

Claudia Comte

Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

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Forewords

Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza
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Imagine that our very existence is about to end at a time when marine oxygen levels were far lower than they are today. I am asking you to travel back in time 250 million years, to the Upper Triassic period. I want to explore with you an era that set the stage for the Permian extinction (which lasted 15 million years), the mother of all extinctions, during which 95 percent of all marine life died.

Imagine a single-celled organism, a type of algae, that lived by extracting energy from the sun alongside corals that had been growing in the ocean for millennia. As the extinction took hold of the planet, these two different life-forms came together to develop a symbiotic relationship that ensured the survival of both species throughout one of the darkest periods in this planet's history. By giving the algae a home, the coral gained photosynthetic energy that ensured its survival through a life cycle controlled by the cosmic synchronicity of the sun and the moon. It is the corals' innate ability to morph, adapt, clone, evolve, symbiose, and reproduce that makes them ideal role models for the twenty-first century and beyond. Maybe we should admire corals not only for their beauty but also for their intelligence!

Imagine that corals were to survive five further planetary extinctions. Does their present retreat mean they are sensing that another one is about to happen? Is it possible that they can sense extinctions better than our scientists can predict them? As I think most of us have already realized, we are at a critical point, and if we want to survive this next extinction, maybe we should look more closely at our coral systems for the warning signs of what is ahead. Let us give thanks for this lesson in resilience, and first and foremost let us accept that we too exist in a complex ecosystem that we do not control. We must give nature a chance to recover and our oceans a chance to breathe life back into our lungs.

If we step back (or swim back) for a moment just to admire the fascinating colours of a reef, made of soft and hard corals, fans and sponges, we experience one of the most diverse

ecosystems on earth. But as you zoom back in, one can't help but notice that this evidence of multispecies coexistence is not without clear boundaries that have been viciously fought over. The narrow gaps that lie between various species of corals have been negotiated down to the last millimeter. Time-lapse camera work by the great masters of coral imagery Coral Morphologic shows the heavy fisticuffs (or tentacle-cuffs) as those boundaries are contested in fierce battles between each polyp out of trillions on a single reef! These conflicts arise over space where the current is favourable, proving that the competition for prime real estate is not just a human phenomenon! And despite this never-ending turf war to build ever-larger structures of the reef, harmonies are found, and order develops out of chaos. Numerous species of corals have even developed a visual language by adopting proteins that enable them to produce fluorescent coloured light, in a phenomenon called bioluminescence, in order to attract specific interactions with other species or to warn them of their subtle poisons.

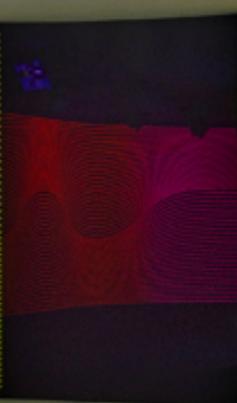
After Nature brilliantly speaks to these extraordinary life-forms, and **Claudia Comte** (who is one of my favourite dive buddies) has created a body of work for this exhibition that is inspired by these extremely complex creatures by giving them an organic shape that is unmistakably a coral, hard or soft, or a sponge in her signature abstract forms. The three-year journey that brought us here, to the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, began during a TBA21–Academy expedition to New Zealand called *The Current #2*, led by **Chus Martínez**. This was followed by a residency at the Alligator Head Foundation in Jamaica, which is an ocean conservation site and a scientific partner of TBA21–Academy. There, Comte's profound dedication to her craft was in evidence as she undertook a project inspired by the coral restoration program at the foundation, working her chainsaw on locally sourced wood, often by the side of the road or on a beach. She collaborated with local sculptors and woodworkers **Eric Samuels** and **Weston St Aubin Panton aka Tweety bird**, engaging them

in the entire process, from log to finished sculpture. Jamaica is a country very proud of its woodworking tradition, which has been part of its cultural expression for a very long time.

I want to express my profound gratitude to Professor **David Gruber** of the City University of New York and to **Colin Foord** of Coral Morphologic for their invaluable contributions, not only to this text but also as our mentors and inspiration during this whole process. Without their guidance and experience we would never have understood the enormity of what we were embarking on. I am in constant admiration of **Chus Martínez**, who held on to the conviction that this project must become a healing exhibition for Madrid and beyond. She encouraged us all to keep up hope and inspiration during these dark times. I want to thank **Araceli Galán**, who so brilliantly served as project manager here in Madrid, and **Leticia de Cos Martín**, who has always ensured the smoothest of processes when it comes to this series of exhibitions at the museum. It is such an honour for TBA21 to be given this opportunity to exhibit the work of the foundation in such a prestigious location and to contribute to the family tradition. Special recognition is due to **Markus Reymann**, director of the TBA21–Academy, who stewarded this entire process from New Zealand to Jamaica. His dedication to the Ocean is an inspiration to us all.

Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza,
TBA21 Founder and Chairwoman





They say the ocean is the great connector. **Claudia Comte's** exhibition *After Nature* is testament to this. The exhibition at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid was commissioned by TBA21 and developed by TBA21–Academy by inviting the artist to participate in a residency at the Alligator Head Foundation in East Portland, Jamaica. It connects Comte's coral sculptures and luminescent wall paintings on view in Madrid to the humpback whales that travel to the Caribbean Sea to mate and pup; the active volcanoes in Aotearoa/New Zealand; the storms, bivalves, and sponges; the tropical trees, wood workers, and marine biologists in Jamaica; a presentation in Lopud, Croatia titled "The Duck is the Übermensch"; the discovery of a biofluorescent hawksbill turtle; and the band Animal Collective. But most importantly, it connects three closely related programs and spaces that were born from the philanthropic vision and through the incredibly generous support and nurturing of **Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza**, who believes passionately in the transformative power of art to usher in the urgently needed systemic changes that will ensure a more just, peaceful, and abundant life on this planet for generations to come.

For the past ten years, TBA21–Academy has been working collaboratively with artists, scientists, legal experts, conservationists, activists, and other practitioners on fostering a deeper understanding of and relationship to the ocean. We do this by diving deep into the spheres of science, conservation, policy, and education and have been given the incredible opportunity to develop an oceanic practice and methodology that is based on processes created at TBA21, while maintaining an independent identity for TBA21–Academy, which aspires to work with artists on their research and processes, not only focusing on the production of artworks. On TBA21–Academy's tenth anniversary, the exhibition *After Nature* brings many convivial relationships and friendships nurtured over years to the fore and shines a light on the constellation that TBA21 allowed to form with and through its support.

The journey of this work began in 2013, with a voyage to the Silver Bank, approximately 90 miles off the coast of the Dominican Republic. After having circumnavigated Iceland and crossed the Atlantic to arrive in Baffin Bay, Canada, followed by a tremendously illuminating stop at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute in Massachusetts, a nearly catastrophic fire aboard the 39-meter explorer vessel *Dardanella*, the temporary home of TBA21–Academy, and subsequently an extended yard period, our journey to the Silver Bank was really only the second exploratory voyage in the now ten-year history of TBA21–Academy. At the end of this journey, one of the participants, the marine biologist and coral reef specialist **Rubén Torres**, asked if he could show us a private initiative in Silver Bank where he and a group of boys from his neighborhood who he had taught how to dive, had installed and tended to a coral nursery in one of the sandy bays of the island. This effort was so inspiring that **Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza** immediately asked if it would be possible to replicate it in other parts of the Caribbean, thinking of the steadily declining health of the coral reefs in Portland, on the northeast coast of Jamaica. That was where she had learned how to swim, snorkel, and dive in tropical waters teeming with life on healthy, diverse, and resilient reefs. Over the course of her life, she witnessed the compounding effects of hurricanes, viral diseases infecting the corals and sea urchins, overfishing, and the devastation caused by dynamite fishing. These compounding effects tipped the reef system from being coral-dominated to algae-dominated, a condition multiplying so rapidly that it quickly smothered every new coral recruit. When Torres visited Portland the following year, he brought along his friend **Dayne Buddo**, also a coral reef specialist and at the time the scientific research coordinator for the University of the West Indies' Discovery Bay Marine Laboratory. Both were confident that we would be able to successfully install an in-sea coral nursery and start outplanting soon after. As a result of this fortuitous gathering, TBA21–Academy entered into a collaboration with the univer-

sity, setting up a makeshift laboratory for university professors and PhD students to work, collecting water quality and fish stock data, looking at coral cover and surface temperatures, and investigating lionfish community behaviors in Portland, where the university did not have a marine lab even though that is the area where the oceanic currents—with all the life they carry and generate—reach Jamaica.

Along with these efforts, TBA21–Academy’s program continued traveling aboard the *Dardanella*, crossing the Panama Canal and into the Pacific Ocean, traveling up the West Coast of the American continent with stops in Galapagos, Cocos Island in Costa Rica, and eventually arriving in the Sea of Cortez, where we encountered the phenomenal conservation work done by the local community in Cabo Pulmo. This fishing community sensed the coming of a total collapse of fish stocks in an area where life and diversity had been so abundant only a generation ago that **Jacques Cousteau** once called it the aquarium of the world. The local community decided to go down the long and treacherous route of ecosystem restoration by instigating a heavily patrolled marine protected area. There we found an extraordinary marine environment teeming with life and an abundance of big predators, from schools of jacks and groupers to different species of sharks, which is the best sign of a healthy ecosystem, and an extremely engaged community thriving by encouraging closely monitored diving tourism, whale watching, and sports fishing outside of the protected area. Their effort was so inspiring that when we learned that the shore of East Portland was an ideal place for a fish sanctuary, it was the best practices from the community in Cabo Pulmo that we aspired to emulate. Since there are a number of fishing communities in the area, we needed to bring them onboard, involving the fisherfolk in the design and setup of the East Portland Fish Sanctuary, which was officially sanctioned under the Jamaican Fishing Industry Act in 2016. With it, we created the Alligator Head Foundation to manage the site and established the Alligator Head Marine Lab together with the

University of the West Indies. The Alligator Head Foundation takes a collaborative approach to protecting fish stocks, restoring habitats, and regenerating local economies. Its programs include coral and mangrove restoration, turtle and sea grass protection, watershed management, and alternative livelihood programs for the fisherfolk, all working toward a fish-filled sea, abundant reefs, and striving communities.

The Alligator Head Foundation is the conservation science partner of TBA21–Academy and collaborates regularly with the Academy by hosting an artist-in-residence program designed to create deeper insights into the marine ecosystem and the efforts to restore it. It also occasionally creates alliances with artists who graduated from The Current, TBA21–Academy’s fellowship program, facilitating intimate art-science explorations. The Current’s first cycle was initiated during the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Paris; its second cycle began in 2018, when expedition leader **Chus Martínez** organized a first voyage to Aotearoa/New Zealand and invited **Claudia Comte** as one of the five participants. Despite confronting severe seasickness, Comte was determined to engage, having just learned how to dive and being completely mesmerized by the underwater world. Following that journey, **Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza** decided to commission Comte to develop an exhibition for the TBA21 program at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, for which Comte decided to create a new body of work based on her underwater experiences. To support her research, TBA21–Academy invited her to do a residency at the Alligator Head Foundation and work closely with the local marine scientists. Together we took several preparatory trips to Jamaica to identify and source tree trunks that had fallen during previous storms, built a studio right next to the marine lab, and found a group of local wood workers to work with Comte on the sculptures. When everything was set up and Comte arrived in Portland for the first leg of her ten-week residency, we also invited **David Gruber** and **Colin Foord** from Coral Morphologic as international experts to consult together

with **Denise Henry** from the Alligator Head Foundation and **Dayne Buddo**. Together they accompanied the process and supported the exhibition, generously contributing guidance, thoughts, and materials that come together in the exhibition on view. At the end of her stay in Jamaica, Comte was adamant that she wanted to leave something behind; having learned about the difficulties around coral restoration, she decided to create and install three concrete cacti from her series of cactus sculptures in the marine protected area. For me, these have become a monument to the efforts of the local fisherfolk who have trusted the Alligator Head Foundation and came on this journey of recovery despite the hardships and changes that came with it. Without them the restoration of the ecosystem would be impossible. The three cacti standing tall on the sea-floor of the East Portland Fish Sanctuary now host a number of staghorn coral outplants that will soon provide shelter for juvenile fish. They are a reminder that we need the most unconventional alliances to embark on this great recovery.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. The same could be said of making a film or an exhibition. But it takes an entangled network of villages to work in solidarity to transition from an extractive consumer society to a nurturing community working collaboratively on a future that is regenerative and just.

Markus Reymann,
TBA21-Academy Director

Claudia Comte at TBA21–Academy

The Current Expedition Fellow



[TBA21–Academy The Current II](#)
**Chus Martínez, Expedition #1:
To Find the Vegan Lion
North Islands, New Zealand,
March 9–24, 2018**

In 2018, Claudia Comte embarked on a voyage to the North Islands of New Zealand aboard the R/V *Dardanella* as one of the Fellows of The Current, TBA21–Academy's flagship program that cultivates transdisciplinary practices and the exchange of ideas around bodies of water and their understanding. Led by Chus Martínez, the second cycle of The Current spanned from 2018–20, exploring questions of artistic intelligence, philosophy, science, and nature.

The Current Convening Contributor



[TBA21–Academy The Current II](#)
**Chus Martínez, Convening #1:
[The Waves of the Oh!s and the Ah!s](#)
Ocean Space, Venice,
September 28–29, 2018**

Continuing her engagement with TBA21–Academy at Chus Martínez's first Convening in Venice, Claudia Comte presented *The Day that Wood and Matter Wanted to Become Salt Water*, 2018, a performance with music by Egon Elliut and dance by Cecilia Bengolea, created especially for this occasion. The Convening took place in Chiesa di San Lorenzo, which became TBA21–Academy's planetary center, Ocean Space, in 2018.

Claudia Comte at TBA21–Academy

TBA21–Academy Residency



[Alligator Head Foundation,](#)
**Port Antonio, Jamaica,
March, April, and June 2019**

Inspired by landscape, traditional craftsmanship, and local community knowledge since her youth in the Swiss countryside, in March 2019, Comte explored the intelligence of plant and aquatic life in coastal Jamaica. During a six-week residency program with TBA21–Academy at the Alligator Head Foundation in Port Antonio, Comte produced a new series of chainsaw carved sculptures made from endemic Jamaican wood with abstracted forms partly derived from marine life.

Comission: *Underwater Cacti*



Claudia Comte
***Underwater Cacti*, 2019–ongoing**
3 (of a total of 9) 3D underwater
sculptures at East Portland
Fish Sanctuary, Alligator Head
Foundation
Commissioned by TBA21–Academy
Site-specific public artwork

In July 2019, Comte installed a permanent underwater exhibition in Jamaica, transforming her newest series of site-specific cacti sculptures into sustainable works dedicated to ocean advocacy. Designed as a monument for marine protection and a tribute to the collective effort of the local community to restore the ecosystem, Comte invites us to meditate on our approach to vulnerable ecosystems.



The Days and the Nights of the Ocean

Chus Martínez



1.

Our ways of knowing are shaped by two stars: the moon and the sun. All too often, we think of them as opposites but, actually, they are the very image of non-binary life, one ordered by a movement that blends light into darkness and opens darkness to light: movement and repetition as the source of possibility, regeneration and life. Thus, it is no wonder this exhibition is divided in two chambers: day and night—a room of light and a room of darkness. However, there is an element that unifies the two worlds, a wall painting, a series of waves that runs from the first space into the second, inviting us to think about the possibility of an infinite visit, a permanent bond between the two elements. Inviting us to the question: What comes first, day or night? There is no right answer. They are eternally consecutive, as are the elements displayed in the two rooms. We do see them as separate, rather they allude to life systems in complete entanglement, in a constant flow of regeneration. And this is what this exhibition is all about: regeneration, the possibility of life, of the re-emergence of life after destruction. This is what every morning is about, and every tide interacting with the moon. We need continuity and we imagine it as a flow, as the result of an organic response surprising us time and time again when we thought nothing more was possible.

2.

Entering the exhibition, we encounter two elements, a beguiling wall painting and a series of coral-shaped wooden sculptures. The corals emerge from the tropical forests of Jamaica, produced mostly from fallen trees. They look soft and their generic shapes already seem familiar and friendly. It is as if we know them already. We wonder if we have encountered them before, perhaps in a comic, a cartoon, or in an advertisement? Their size is also appealing. It is easy to imagine walking

towards them and impulsively cuddling one in our arms. They form a family presenting us with their shapes and typologies. They are, somehow, manifesting their “coral-ness.” We have all seen corals before, but these are strange ambassadors of the others, the real ones, which appear to us as stone-like and beautifully-coloured. And now we take notice of them! These ones have no colors. Well, they do, but their color is that of the wood they are made of and bears no resemblance to the hues and tones under the surface of the sea. And yet, they are so eloquent and reliable in their coralness that we do not doubt them.

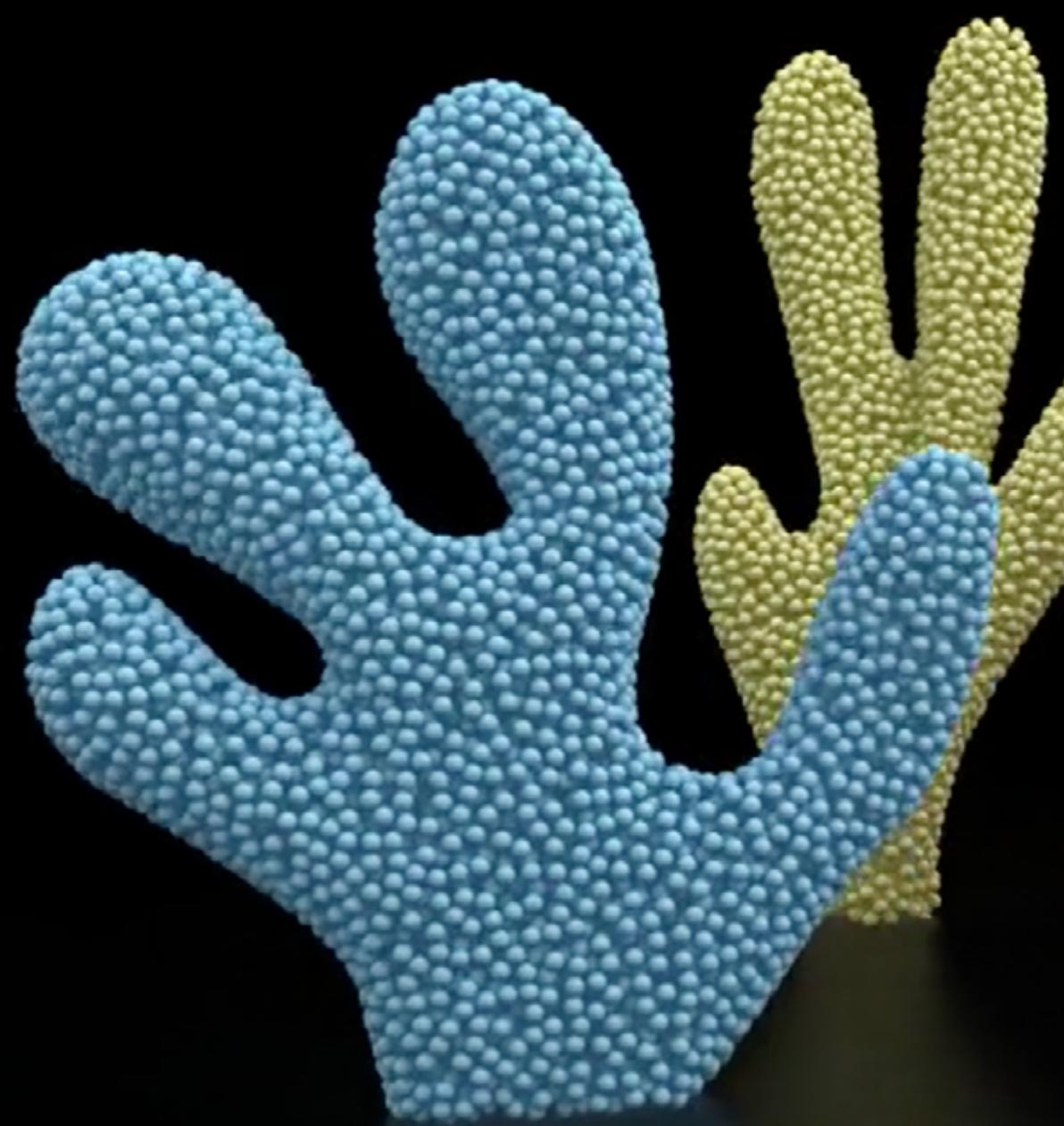
They could be considered *kawaii*, the Japanese notion that is often translated into English as “cute.” But this cuteness has a strong anthropological function, and a magical one as well. Western culture has never been good at cultivating cuteness and this may explain why, for centuries, we had a hard time relating and finding ways of embracing non-human forms of intelligence. When I was a student, a teacher of mine used to say: “Shakespeare, my dear fellows, was never cute!” We knew what our honourable teacher wanted to say. The themes and forces that shaped the dramas of Shakespeare were rooted in the antagonistic tensions of the binary world, the world that divides the good from the bad, the lovers from the haters, the storms from the calm seas. The development of reason—he thought—needs a continuous struggle with enemies, adversaries, darkness. Not long ago I found myself re-reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The play chronicles the adventures of four young Athenian lovers and six amateur actors who are manipulated by the faeries that inhabit the forest in which the play is set. And guess where cuteness emerges! In that very forest! The play revolves around gender reversals; this wonder occurring through the figure of Puck. Puck invents a language for capricious spirits, magical fancy, fun-loving humour, a language of lovely, evocative words that permeate the atmosphere of the play, reaching our senses with a warmth that cannot be resisted. This sensation of not being able to contain our feel-

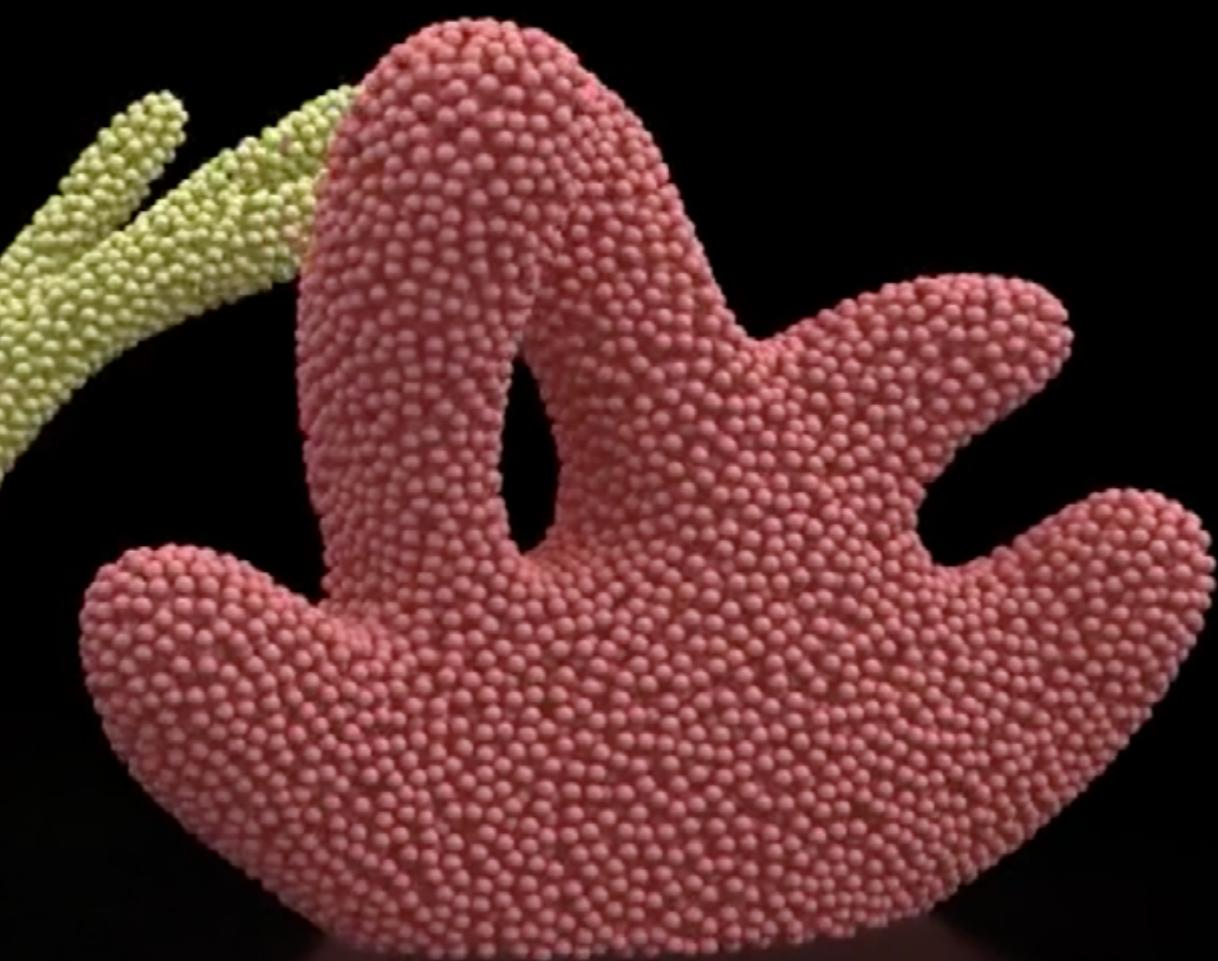
ings, the sincerity of a sudden attraction to a phenomenon is what the Japanese call *kawaii*. In Western culture, so keen on describing processes in consecutive stages, the fear of remaining a child forever, or possessing childlike traits as an adult, has negative connotations. But it is this pureness of heart that makes a new order of relations possible between humans and nature, between the human and non-human realms. This radical sincerity of the heart is what I think is present in those coral sculptures.

They encounter us with the same surprise we find upon meeting them. They stand on a mirror that references water. They stand on a mirror because its surface, like the surface of clear water, can reflect the skies and encompass the poetics of impermanence that constitutes their habitat: the winds, the clouds, the ground kneaded by the roots of the plants, the birds and the animals passing. The mirror is there to remind us that those corals were trees and that trees have been constantly affected by the actions of humans. The mirror is also a call for awareness. We see ourselves reflected because it is mostly us—the human species—endangering their existence. Those corals, however, do not bear a negative message. We see our reflection in the mirror and we come together again. In seeing this image, we sense gratitude. Luckily, we are still able to connect. Nihilistic despair about our actions only reinforces a cynical view and disassociates us from our agency and the will to change our behaviour.

3.

The most precious thing about life is its uncertainty. The acceptance and celebration of this idea would liberate us from greed, from the impulse to control and reduce nature and other forms of life to the status of resources. Norms are fundamental for regulating—and hopefully stopping—abusive behaviour. However, the written law is dependent on the raising of a profound sensitivity to the emotional and affective dimensions of





the existence and logics of life. The regeneration of the coral reefs can only be possible if, at the same time, we control and forbid overfishing. If we do not create empathy for the reef, for the time nature requires for regeneration, for inventing ways of assisting animals and plants in their quest for survival.

These wooden corals are a way of expressing how the forests on earth contemplate and reflect on the forest of the seas. Trees and corals make us breathe. These wooden replicas make sense. Sculpturally, the forms echo the pathos of the oceans. They help us to accept the basic connections that sustain survival and acknowledge that we need to desire a view of the reef embracing everything and everyone, including the coast, the mistakes made, the damage of a colonial destruction that makes it impossible for the inhabitants of those communities to love their ocean, as well as the time it will take to reverse the damage, and the many times damage will be perpetrated again before a renewal can happen. This back and forth flow, between damage and correction, is possibly the hardest thing to accept. Western cultures are driven by development fever; once progress is set in motion it needs to happen. The same imperative is true of conservationism, of the will to stop the damage from now on. From now on, all will be better. And then the damage returns. The mistakes recur. Living in acceptance of the time that it takes to introduce love into the system, to completely change not only the structures, but their very DNA in order to establish coexistence, is the most important part of this exercise.

4.

Who killed the reefs? I was unaware, as I assume many of you were, that the reefs of Jamaica were among the most beautiful of our planet. Their beauty lured people from different parts of the world to move there, making the place “popular.” It is sad that the human desire to enjoy beauty always is always accompanied by exploitation. Hurricane Allen, the strongest

Caribbean storm of the past century, greatly damaged the reefs in 1980. The great storm hit the coast of Jamaica on August 4, the same week as the Moscow Olympic games. Do you remember Misha the bear who was all over the packaging of our breakfast cereals, cocoa, and t-shirts? Misha's creator was **Viktor Chizhikov**, who passed away last year during the pandemic. He was a children's book illustrator and his design, chosen among sixty others, touched the hearts of millions. The bear is the national animal of Russia—they say—as were the corals of Jamaica, I guess. Curiously, if you search for the meaning of the name Misha, the most popular result is the Hebrew "he who resembles God." Animals are so important and yet, we have done everything possible to describe their presence on earth as inferior to ours. But wait! I did not finish telling you about the reefs. Allen, the storm, did his damage, but before the ecosystem of the region could recover another disaster occurred: a pandemic. A virus, perhaps originating in Central America, where it was first detected by marine biologists, travelled with the currents killing all black sea urchins. Pollution, overfishing, and boat traffic added to the disaster and damage seemed to be irreversible. Reports describing the death of the sea urchins brought tears to our eyes. Its speed and extension was of such a scale as never seen before. Apparently, it all started with the starfish. Scientists understood only recently that the starfish died first. Within days, the animals' arms walked off in different directions, and their entire bodies melted into goop. The next observation concerns the sea urchins. I did not know that starfish eat them, without whom, they first covered the seabed, creating a carpet instead of hiding in the cracks of rocks and reefs. But soon after the starfish died, so did the sea urchins. These episodes have been occurring since the 70s, and the immense mortality of the 80s has recurred several times on different scales. The only explanation is that of a virus. A virus that had been active in marine ecosystems for decades—records state for around seven decades, but perhaps longer—suddenly flourished



although the reason they suddenly become so active and deadly is unclear. Yet, as in the case of pollution and corona viruses, there is a correlation between the increasing acidity of the sea and the ocean's warming. These two factors may explain why starfish are so vulnerable, why sea urchins cannot fight and, instead, die. Reading these reports, we realize how one element affects the other, the starfish affect the increase—at first—of sea urchins; the proliferation of urchins affects the kelp forests, small fish, and the nutrient production that occurs in the ecosystems. And also how the kelp forests proliferate uncontrollably if the sea urchins disappear. How the system out of sync and balance destroys the coral reefs.

Where does the cycle of destruction start? We know the answer too well.

5.

In the same room as the corals, we encounter the currents: a large, delicate, and bright wall painting that gives movement to the whole room. Ah! Now we realize the walls of the room are not square but shaped like an ellipse. Natural water circulation does not go hand in hand with the human fetish for corners and cubic spaces. Since ancient times, currents have interested sailors. Or said differently, the study and understanding of the currents is mandatory for survival in the oceans and at sea. There are two types of currents: surface and deep. Surface currents are wind driven, deep currents are density driven. The former flow across the surface at a depth of a few hundred metres. I bet we humans have only encountered these moody, weather-determining bodies of water. Deep currents flow near the ocean floor. The dynamics of the ocean are so strong and difficult for us to imagine. Both surface and deep currents merge; deep currents resulting from cold water being pushed to the bottom. Cold water is dense, heavy, and descends to great depths, but it stays in movement. Surface currents are moved by the winds, they moderate the climate—or accelerate

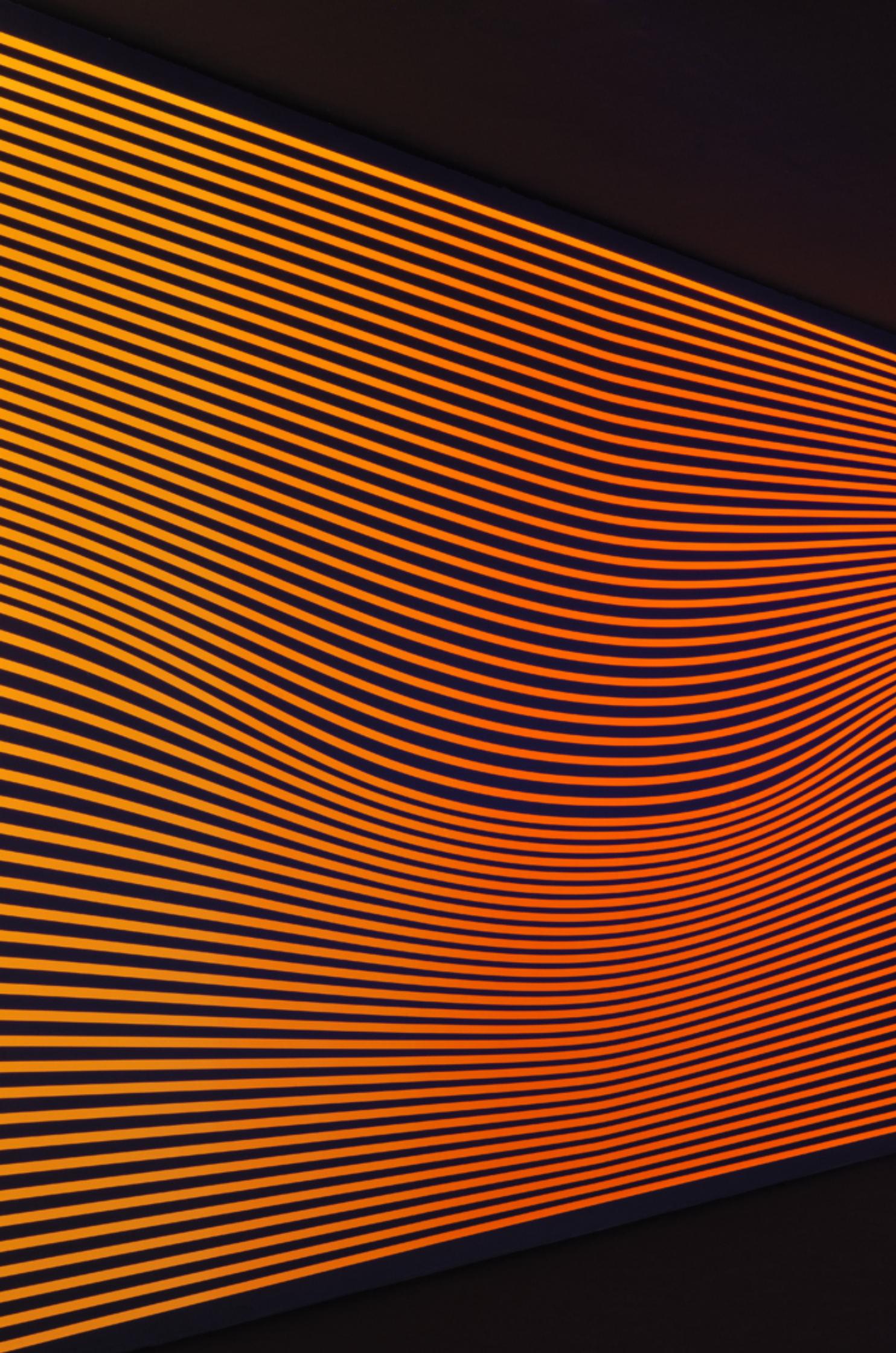
its ferocity—as they transfer heat from the Equator to the Poles. And while sea surfaces are defined by the interaction between the air and water, the deep ocean remains in constant flow due to what is known as the “global ocean conveyor belt.” The water at the dark depths of the ocean moves because it is cold and saline. As warm water moves northwards through the hemispheres, cooler water sinks and moves south. This cold water flows all the way to Antarctica and eventually returns to the surface, creating a conveyor belt that encircles the Earth. The drawings and diagrams of this constant flow are gorgeous. The ocean has such a complex mind. The scope of events cannot be described in words. It is easier to imagine them under the hypnotic effect of these colourful lines –as precise as the waters themselves, as the waves and the winds, as the coast and the circles they form, as salt crystals, as the ice they touch, as the millions of creatures they embrace, as the rivers they swallow, as the boats they carry... Here these lines form waves and seem at rest. They are—as wave scientist **Alexander Babanin** puts it—“ordinary waves.” Oh yes! We humans even discriminate between waves. Not all waves are of equal interest to us. I imagine that the reef understands the functions of the waves, but we, since ancient times, observe the waves as visitors to the ocean and judge them as ocean critics. Their force and power in breaking towards the coast, their height, their length, their destructive potential... We also assign genders to the waves—as ocean anthropologist **Stefan Helmreich** has explained: ordinary waves are more feminine as icons of rhythmic and “predictable” motion, while other waves are interpreted in more masculine tones as the embodiment of chaos and destruction. Our love for binaries never seems to end. The day room, inhabited by the wooden corals, is submerged in calm waters. The waters are warm like the colours of the lines, heated by the sun, light. Actually these lines are, strictly speaking, not waves at all, but an exercise in distilling waves into curvilinear forms, taming the ocean for our sake, creating a universal language where the formlessness of the

curve engulfs all other forms present in those fertile waters. The wall painting could be presented as a necessary oceanic disorder so that an order can be presented to us, that of life in the reef.

6.

I have always found the ocean to be a strange place after dark. Strange is not necessarily scary, but not calm either. As a child I thought that if you fall into the dark waters off the Atlantic coast—where I am from—a channel would form in the waters taking you directly to the depths or to America. Corridors would form each and every time a sailor fell from a ship at night, that is why their corpses cannot be found. Sea legends are born with the moonlight. Stars reflect on the water's surface, the dark blue hues of the waves become glass-like, and the sea shimmers. Bioluminescence cannot be explained coldly. From planktonic microorganisms that emit blue light, making the surface seem extraterrestrial, to the bioluminescent bacteria that create the milky seas in the northwestern Indian Ocean, reports by sailors over centuries have described this out-of-this-world nocturnal field as crisp, glowing snow fields on the waters. The light is so strong that, in 2005, satellite images revealed these phenomena can be seen from outer space.

Animals also glow in the dark. Light emission is common among fish, squid, mollusks, and even turtles. In shallow waters—like the ones portrayed in this exhibition, the waters of the reefs and a bit deeper—bioluminescent fish display their light at night. It is a biochemical reaction. The same can be said of so many phenomena, like love, yet still we will need poets and playwrights to recreate these encounters scene after scene. There are things we never tire of, neither do we demand an exact explanation that would spoil our joy. If we could have the pleasure of swimming by a group of glowing squid in the early hours of a summer evening and we suddenly see that they are glowing with the coral reef nearby, we would not want



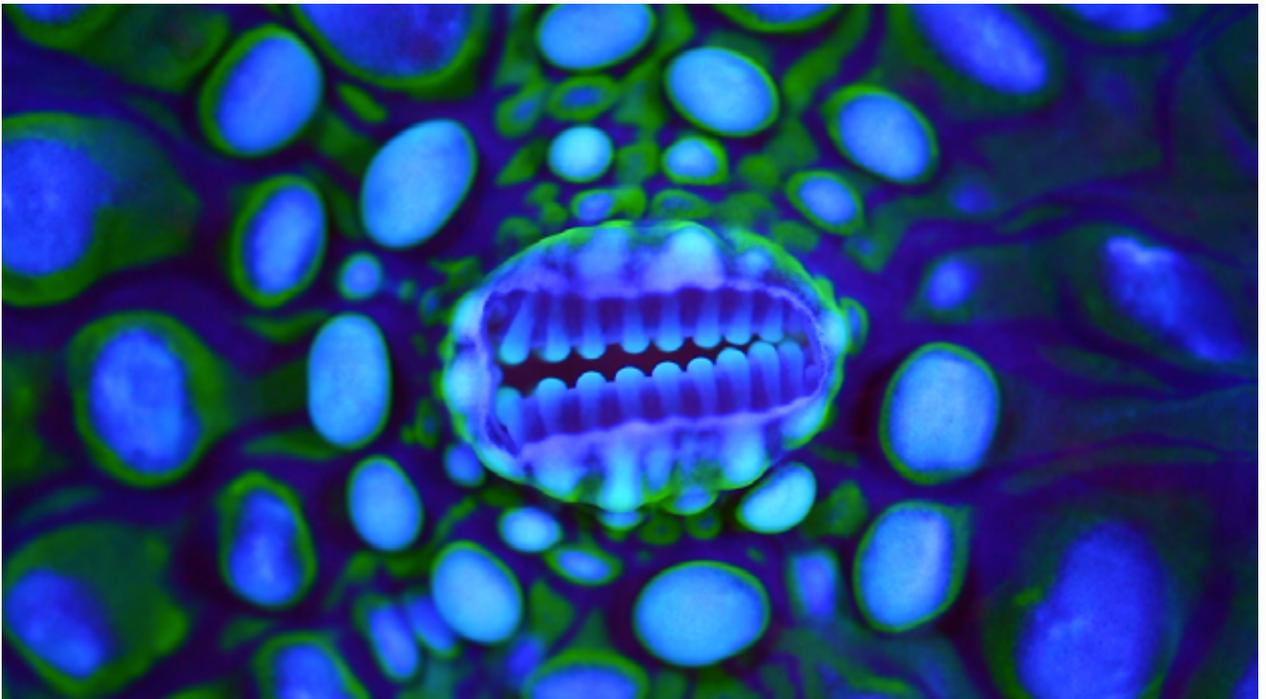


to sense anything else than their call for our attention, paying attention to the millions of light sources our eyes have been unaware of for centuries, partly because our eyes cannot see as do the eyes of fish. We should be aware of how corals are able to synchronize and simultaneously release their eggs and sperm during a period of one hour, one night a year, in spring, under the moonlight. Light acts as a synchronizer of life. That is why the second room of our reef is set at night, vibrating with the lights of all the creatures of the reef.

7.

The second scene of the exhibition takes place at night. Surrounded by the magical effect of the bioluminescent waters, a new family of corals emerges. This time they are digitally animated, forming and un-forming, playfully giving us a new insight to their morphology. These corals are the characters of a story they would like to tell to the world: how what we see happening in seconds—coming back, regenerating—takes them years to accomplish. Corals are a complex form of symbiosis between plant and animal. This complexity is shown in their morphology. Variation in coral community structure and form is correlated with changes in light conditions across shallow environments, and the shape and size of coral colonies determine how they interact with the physical environment and with other organisms. And because form determines function, becoming a key element in understanding how we can help regenerate the colonies, the study of the traits of coral has become a matter of great significance. And so, corals have gone Big Data. Collecting and creating trait databases may assist the advancement of ecological and evolutionary research, since traits provide the key to the organism's function and fitness. These animated corals tell the story of their future. We are not scientists and therefore unable to read their physiological, ecological, or functional traits to infer their problems. Nevertheless, the information is there, dancing before





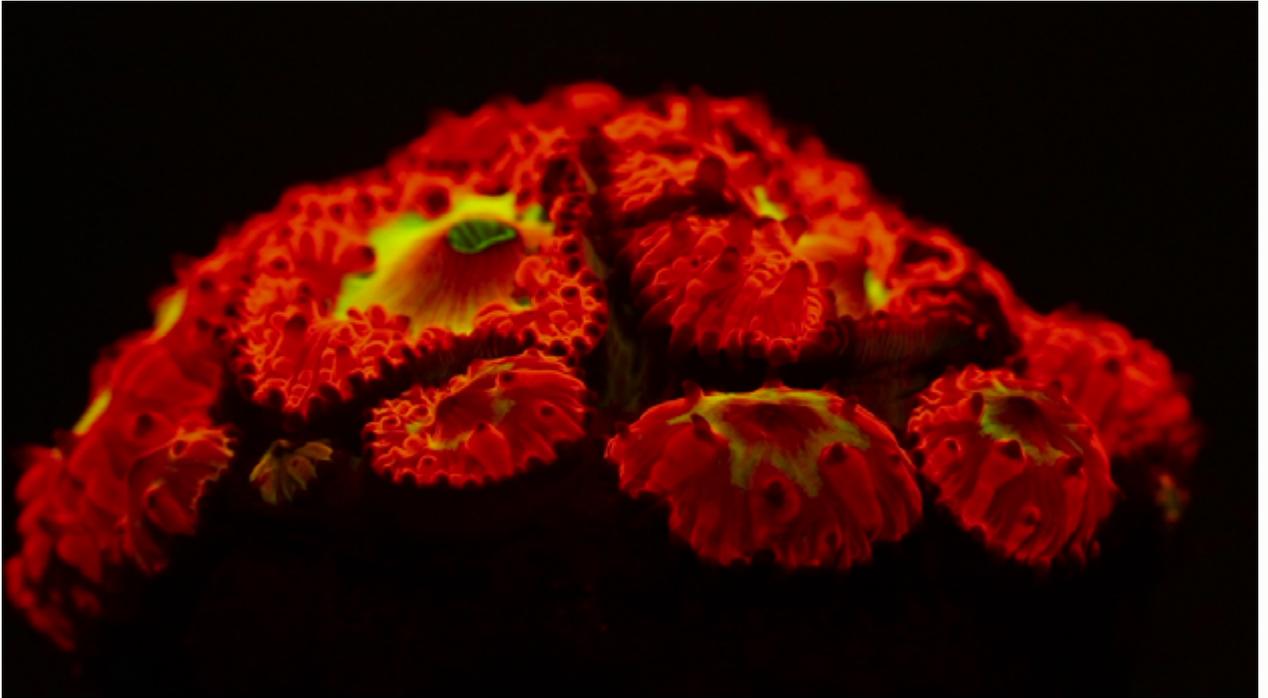
our eyes. And again, there is nothing sad in their storytelling, in their disappearing and reappearing for us. On the contrary, we feel strongly for them. What is the source of our joy? The answer lies in the structure of our own storytelling. In the beginning—it is said—the earth was without form, a void; and darkness was upon its face as a giant cloud of gas and dust collapsed to form our solar system. The planets were forged as the nebula spun, jolted into motion by a nearby supernova, and in the centre, the most rapid compression of particles ignited to become our sun.

Now, here, in the presence of this cubic digital display, we feel these corals are our new sun, the source of light and love.

8.

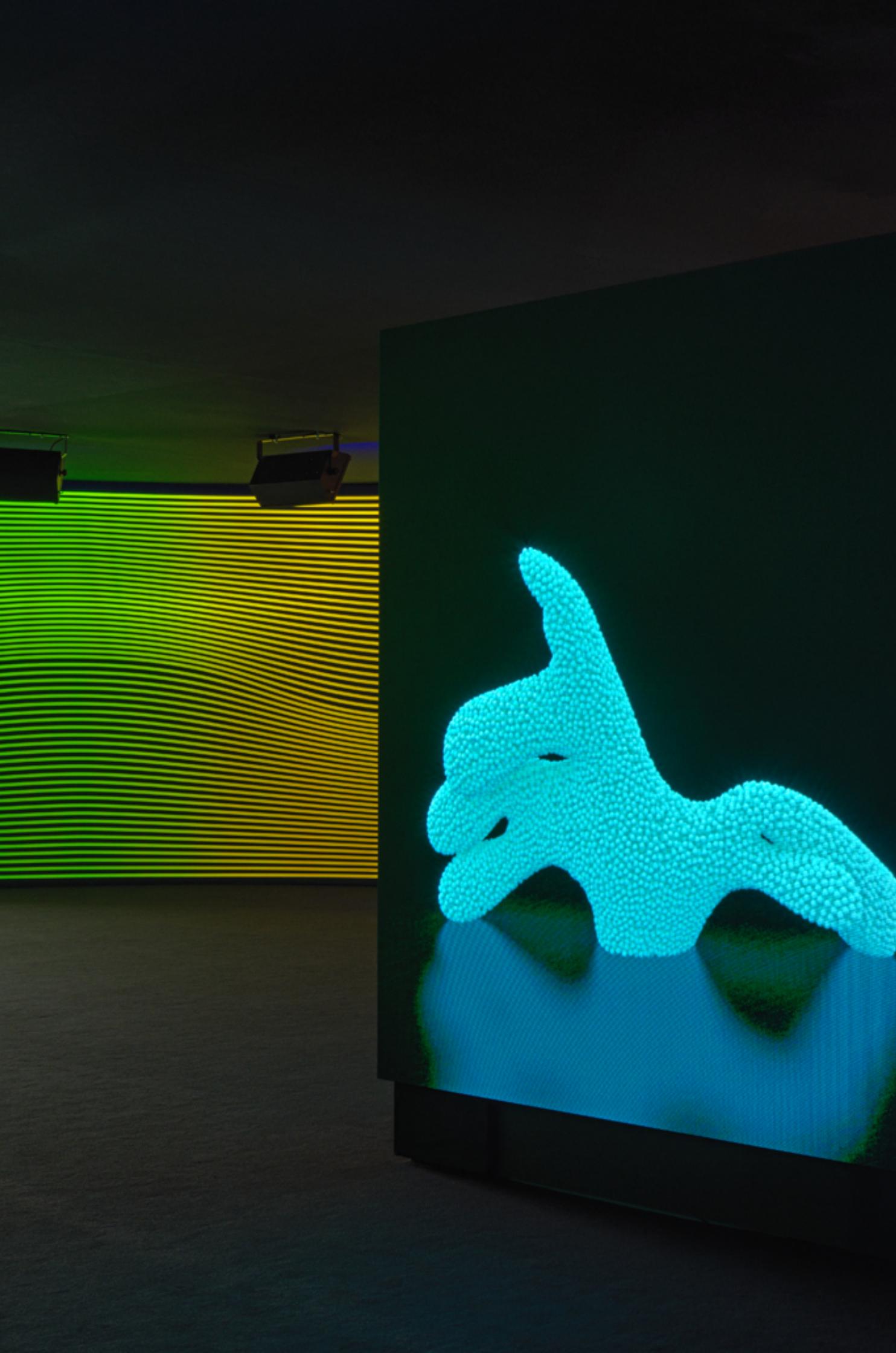
I believe in the night.

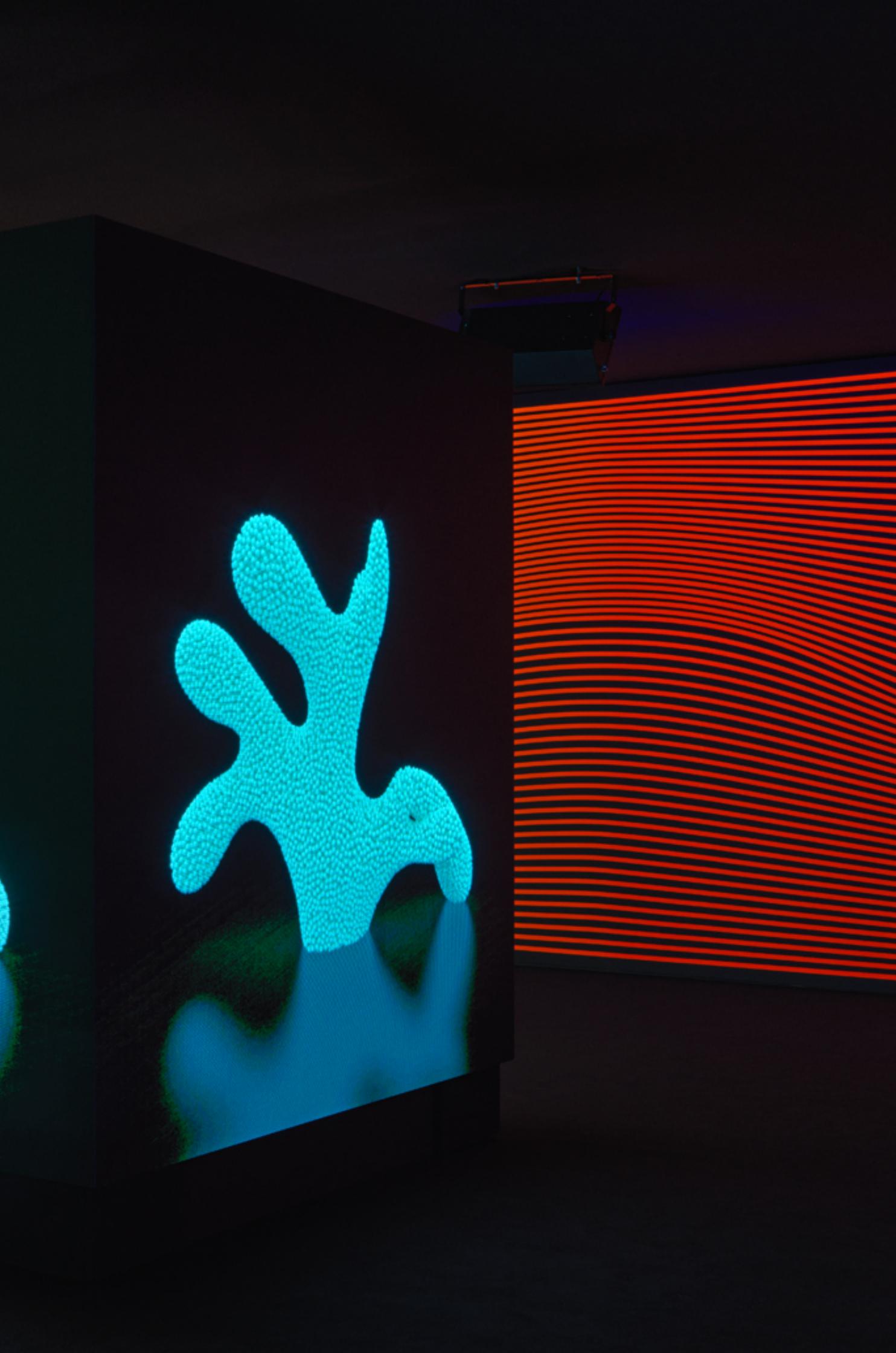
The Magic Flute, Mozart's *singspiel* awakens all passions in me. It was his last work. It premiered on September 30, 1791, not long before his death on December 5. It is structured in only two acts—like Claudia Comte's installation. It is not my scholarly reading of the play, but my first memory and interpretation of



the work that marked me forever. Two birds—Papagena and Papageno—singing on stage in the language of the listeners, German, represented for me the first “call to action,” the most radical epistemological awakening I can recall. The birds singing—and us, singing along with their tunes—was the very first moment I understood that interspecies communication is not a matter of deciphering but a matter of art. I will not go on here about Mozart's intentions, yet I believe he created the conditions—aesthetically and emotionally—for the emergence of a very powerful interspecies exercise. And it is so very eloquent that it can be used as an argument to advance that it is an art we need to transform for the future of coexistence. Ohs and Ahs in the audience! A rumble of thunder announces the Queen of the Night's arrival! She appears clad in darkness and stars—as if she were the Night itself. She hands the world a magic flute and a magic silver bell. Remember: these have been, since then, the fundamental tools of transformation.

Chus Martínez,
Curator







List of Artworks

Fire Coral (four short fingers), 2020
Almond wood
72 x 62.5 x 31 cm

Fire Coral (five fingers), 2020
Almond wood
67.5 x 84 x 31 cm
Thyssen-Bornemisza Art
Contemporary Collection

Fire Coral (six fingers), 2020
Almond wood
56.5 x 67.5 x 21 cm
Nacho Polo & Robert Onuska
Collection

Fire Coral (four long fingers), 2020
Almond wood
96 x 56 x 30 cm
KAT_A Collection

Pillar Coral (small), 2020
Willow
h = 120, Ø 21 cm

Pillar Coral (large), 2020
Willow
h = 171, Ø 17 cm

Pillar Coral (extra large), 2020
Willow
h = 182, Ø 16 cm

Pillar Coral (extra small), 2020
Willow
h = 47.5, Ø 19.5 cm

Pillar Coral (medium), 2020
Willow
h = 148, Ø 22 cm

Sun Coral (nine headed hydra), 2020
Dogwood
106.5 x 29 x 25.5 cm
Thyssen-Bornemisza Art
Contemporary Collection

Sun Coral (six headed hydra), 2020
Dogwood
76 x 30 x 24 cm

*Sun Coral (seven headed hydra),
2020*
Dogwood
122.5 x 25 x 22 cm

*Yellow Sponge (two massive tubes),
2020*
Guinep
125 x 165 x 100 cm

Yellow Sponge (one tube), 2020
Guinep
141 x 55 x 48 cm

*Yellow Sponge (one massive tube),
2020*
Guinep
69 x 33 x 37 cm

Yellow Sponge (three tubes), 2020
Guinep
116.5 x 77 x 63 cm

Elkhorn Coral (six branches),
2020
Button wood
89.5 x 57.5 x 20 cm
Private collection

Elkhorn Coral (eleven branches),
2020
Almond wood
102 x 78 x 31 cm
Private Collection, Zurich

Fire Coral (five growths), 2020
Almond wood
53.5 x 85.5 x 48.5 cm

Soft Coral (five teeth), 2020
Bitter damsel
147.5 x 27 x 18.5 cm

Soft Coral (three teeth), 2020
Bitter damsel
78 x 27 x 15.5 cm
Thyssen-Bornemisza Art
Contemporary Collection

Soft Coral (four teeth), 2020
Bitter damsel
110.5 x 32 x 18 cm

Soft Coral (four fangs), 2020
Bitter damsel
106 x 24.5 x 20 cm

*The Morphing Scallops (neon through
fluorescent gradient)*, 2021
Acrylic wall painting
2.64 x 99.3 m

Elastic Simulation, 2021
Digital animation
7' 50", sound

All artworks commissioned
and produced by TBA21–Academy
and Thyssen-Bornemisza
Art Contemporary



Claudia Comte

Claudia Comte (b. 1983) is a Swiss artist based in Basel. Her work centres on the memory of materials and a careful observation of how the hand relates to different technologies.

Comte, who is best known for her site-specific installations, studied at the Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne, ECAL and obtained a Masters of Art in Science of Education at Haute Ecole Pédagogique, Visual Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland. Her practice is guided by a measurement system of her own creation, wherein each artwork specifically relates to another. Comte's minimalist approach to art making is equal parts methodical and dynamic. Ranging from sculpture to painting, to multimedia installation, her works are infused with a distinct sense of playfulness.

Carving by hand, or scanning, or 3D printing are all functions of a knowledge that sculpture possesses and shares every time a new piece comes to life. What we need to learn is how to see—in every pattern, and, object—an environment, oxygen, the way the conditions of our planet modify the materials.

Comte's work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions, including *Jungle and Corals*, König Galerie, Berlin (2021), *The Sea of Darkness*, Kunstraum Dornbirn (2020), *How to Grow and Still Stay the Same Shape*, Castello di Rivoli (2019), *Fruits and Jungle*, König Galerie, London (2019), *I have Grown Taller from Standing with Trees*, Copenhagen Contemporary (2019), *The Morphing Scallops*, Gladstone Gallery, 24th St, New York City (2019), *Zigzags and Diagonals*, MOCA Cleveland (2018), *Swiss Performance Now*, Kunsthalle Basel (2018), *KölnSkulpture #9*, Köln (2017), *La Ligne Claire*, Basement Roma (2017), *NOW I WON*, Messeplatz, Art Basel (2017), *10 Rooms, 40 Walls, 1059 m²*, Kunstmuseum Luzern (2017), *DesertX, Palm Springs, The Language of Things*, with the Public Art Fund, New York (2016), *NO MELON NO LEMON*, Gladstone Gallery, New York (2015), *Easy Heavy III*, Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich (2014), *Sharp Sharp*, David Dale Gallery, Glasgow (2014), and *Elevation 1049*, Gstaad (2013).



Coming Soon

Public program & Upcoming
TBA21 exhibitions

Public Program

Artist Talk with Claudia Comte

On the occasion of the exhibition *After Nature*, a conversation between the artist Claudia Comte and curator Chus Martínez, will be streamed from Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid on Monday, May 10, 2021, at 4:00 pm. The conversation will be presented by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, founder and chairwoman of TBA21, and Markus Reymann, Director of TBA21–Academy.

Monday, May 10, 2021, 4:00 p.m.
online at www.museothyssen.org
and @tba_21

Conversatorio 21 (Conversation Studio 21) – Educathyssen

Conversation with the audience about Claudia Comte, *After Nature*, guided by a museum educator. This activity aims to make the show more accessible and to draw visitors into a lively debate concerning the talk between the artists and the curator.

**Advance registration at
www.educathyssen.org required.**

ARCOmadrid 2021, July 07–11, 2021

During the celebration of ARCOmadrid International Contemporary Art Fair the exhibition will be activated with private visits, performances and talks at the museum and the fair. Program related will be announced through our social media and ARCOmadrid parallel program.

Claudia Comte for st_age, July 12–18, 2021

This digital public program will give the viewers an opportunity to better understand Claudia Comte's working and research processes. Through a series of contextual materials, from a podcast to a conversation or a call to action, we will be able to immerse ourselves in the topics raised as well as the network that has taken part in the development of this exhibition.

www.stage.tba21.org

Hecho a Medida (Made To Measure) – Educathyssen

For community, social, and healthcare organizations and collectives, we offer tours of the exhibition designed in collaboration with participating institutions in order to draw connections between the featured artworks and the specific interests of these groups.

**Advance registration at
www.educathyssen.org required.**

Upcoming TBA21 Projects

st_age: Season 02

www.stage.tba21.org

May-July 2021

Back in 2020, TBA21 created an emergency fund as a means to mitigate cultural loss by commissioning media based works to be presented on **st_age**. This emerged as an open invitation to closely experience the realities of multigenerational artists and cultural practitioners, featuring new works produced for the digital realm.

The second season of **st_age**, which was launched at the beginning of May, will be presenting newly commissioned artworks by **Claudia Comte, Abhishek Hazra, Alaa Mansour, Omar Mismar, Courtney Desiree Morris, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Diana Policarpo, Asunción Molinos Gordo, Naufus Ramírez Figueroa** and **Tahe**. Each will be complemented with contextual material ranging from podcasts to conversations between curator and artist, to custom research clusters, inviting visitors to plunge into the production processes of the artists and connect with the challenges they face.

Throughout Season 02, **st_age** will approach healing from a transformative and spiritual perspective, connected to feminism and female deities as well as to the potential of healing land through sensing nature, learning from ancestral practices, reclaiming indigenous land rights, and applying a decolonial, non-violent attitude towards the challenging times we are living. All these proposals will help us look into the regeneration of the ecosystems—both social and natural—we inhabit. **st_age** is a space to delve deeply into these topics through selected projects, webinars, public conversations, and open talks.

Walid Raad, *Cotton Under My Feet*

Museo Nacional

Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

October 13, 2020-January 23, 2021

Curated by Daniela Zyman

The exhibition *Cotton Under My Feet* consists of a new corpus of works by Lebanese-American artist **Walid Raad**, commissioned by TBA21 and specifically conceived for the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza. Through a practice that is often associated with historical fiction, Raad has created this new project around the genesis of the Museo Thyssen, its collection, archives, and the histories of its holdings.

In *Cotton Under My Feet*, Raad explores different approaches and representations to historical collective realities surrounding the acquisition of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection by the Spanish State. The exhibition unfolds as an imagined investigation of the events and conditions concerning the sale, transfer, display, and storage of the artworks.

Intervening in various sites of the museum, the exhibition will open new interpretative spaces for stories and intuitions related to the collection. The artist presents imagined and hidden episodes, tangled connections, alternative conservation protocols involving insects and nails, and forgotten figures and characters appearing in the museum's halls along this journey through the history of Western art.

Territorial Agency: Oceans in Transformation

**Ocean Space, Venice
May 3-August 29, 2021
Curated by Daniela Zyman
Commissioned by TBA21–Academy
and co-produced with
Luma Foundation**

Territorial Agency's on-going project commissioned by TBA21–Academy explores new ways of connecting research groups that address the oceans during this time of rapid change. Linking science, arts, and politics by way of shared images, datasets, and narratives, the second chapter of this research exhibition continues investigating the complex processes occurring in the global oceans due to the Anthropocene, while raising new questions together with an open community of ocean thinkers and practitioners.

The Soul Expanding Ocean #1: Taloi Havini

**Ocean Space, Venice
May 3-October 27, 2021
Curated by Chus Martínez
Commissioned by
TBA21–Academy and co-produced
with Schmidt Ocean Institute,
co-founded by Wendy Schmidt**

TBA21–Academy presents a solo exhibition dedicated to the artist **Taloi Havini** at Ocean Space, the organization's public venue in Venice.

Havini's work takes on many forms, including sculpture, video, photography, and immersive installations. Through her practice, she explores themes of representation, habitats, inheritance, and the transmission of indigenous knowledge. For this exhibition, *The Soul Expanding Ocean #1: Taloi Havini*, the artist has created a theatrical set in indigo, aquamarine, and ultramarine tones.

Sharon Lockhart, *Four Exercises in Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation System*, 2011

**Museo Guggenheim Bilbao
October 2021-February 2022**

The film installation *Four Exercises in Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation* features **Ruti Sela**, one of Noa Eshkol's long-term dance students, performing four different exercises of the Eshkol-Wachman Movement Notation system (EWMN).

Sela joined Noa Eshkol's Chamber Dance Group in the 1960s together with **Racheli Nul-Kahana** and **Shmulik Zaidel**—Eshkol's longest-standing followers to date. In a sequence of four fixed shots, the film shows the mature and impeccably trained dancer in a demanding solo performance involving complex movement sequences that follow strict compositional laws.

The exhibition will mark the official launch of the journey towards a major event that The Wellbeing Project is hosting in Bilbao in late May of 2022. The event will explore the intersection of inner wellbeing and social change.

Kutluğ Ataman, *Küba*, 2004

**Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid
Commissioned by Artangel, London and co-produced by 54th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg; Thyssen Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna; Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York; Theater der Welt, Stuttgart; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary Collection**

Kutluğ Ataman spent over two years getting to know the habitants of Küba, a neighbourhood of Istanbul, and filming them as they narrate the stories of their lives in an unedited and unmediated stream of words. The arresting stories of sometimes tragic, sometimes bitter events leave a lasting impression. With *Küba*, Ataman seeks to fathom the boundaries—both geographic and mental—of an urban area.

The unsettling stories are presented on old television sets as part of a forty-monitor installation. In front of each TV is a chair, allowing only one viewer per set. Seen and heard individually, their soliloquies present a detailed mosaic of humanity: terror, tragedy, love, obsession, resistance, and survival. Seen and heard together, the voices of *Küba* reveal a deeply moving communal portrait of the hidden society that they are proud to call home.

This piece was donated by TBA21 to the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and will be presented in the near future as part of their permanent collection.

After Nature - Claudia Comte

An exhibition organized by Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza and Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21)

EXHIBITION

**Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza
Paseo del Prado, 8
28014 Madrid (Spain)
www.museothyssen.org**

May 10 – August 22, 2021

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Olga Subirós**

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DIME Museos**

**Lighting Design
Carlos Alzueta**

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Creamos Technology**

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**Press and Institutional Relations of
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STUDIO CLAUDIA COMTE

**Michael Gass, Kelly Tissot, Julian Tschudin
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**Production interns (wall drawing):
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Carolina Quiroga**

**Video Installation
Claudia Comte**

**Animations
Christoph Gissler, Computer Science
Department, University of Freiburg,
Germany**

**Sound Design
Egon Elliut**

**Opening Video
Claudia Comte**

**Script
Chus Martínez**

**Editing
Katarina Rakušček**

**Voiceover
Tyler Barkley**

**Opening song
by Trevaun Dacres aka Blue Jeans,
recorded
by Egon Elliut**

**Biofluorescent corals
by Coral Morphologic**

**Additional coral footage
by Markus Reymann**

**Clownfish and anemone footage
by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza**

**Footage of Claudia Comte and her studio
working on coral sculptures at the Alligator
Head Foundation, Jamaica by Retts Wood**

**Footage of Claudia Comte working
on coral sculptures at the Alligator Head
Foundation, Jamaica
by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza**

**Footage of the installation of Claudia
Comte's Underwater Cacti on the seabed
of Port Antonio, Jamaica recorded
by Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza
and Markus Reymann**

**Footage of Claudia Comte's Underwater
Cacti and coral planting on the seabed**

of Port Antonio, Jamaica, recorded by
David Lee, F-Stop Movies

Footage of the coral nursery at the
East Portland Fish Sanctuary managed
by the Alligator Head Foundation,
Jamaica, recorded by David Lee,
F-Stop Movies

Drone sequences of the studio at Alligator
Head Foundation recorded by Luca
Kaufmann

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www.tba21.org

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#afternature21 @tba21academy



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BORNEMISZA**
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