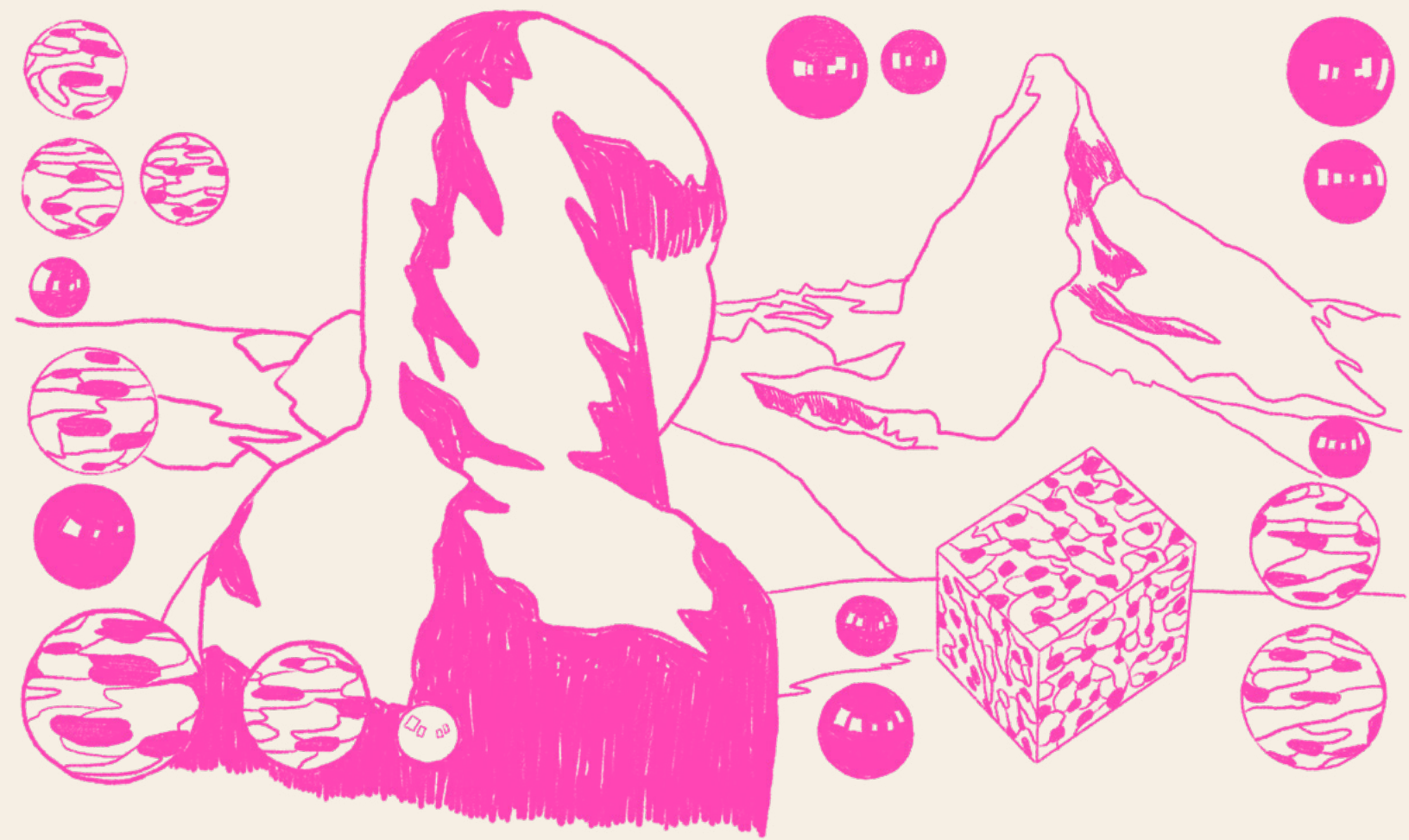


# *The Rodina*: Revolutionizing and Decommodifying Graphic Design

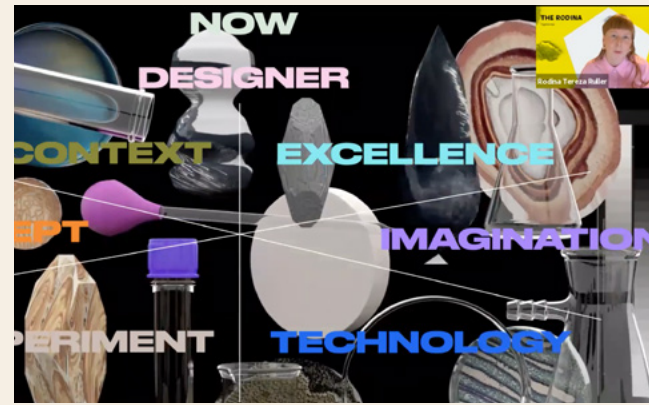
by Isha Tripathi



CCA's Design Lecture Series provides exposure for emerging designers who come from a multitude of disciplines and nationalities. On October 1st, 2021, one half of The Rodina, Tereza Ruller, spoke to CCA students and the general public about their practice in a lecture titled "Togetherness." The Rodina is a post-critical design studio founded in 2012 by the couple Tereza and Vit Ruller, based in The Netherlands. Their work mainly explores graphic design practices across video, print, installation, and performative works. Through their practice, they emphasize the importance of togetherness and explore the aesthetics of error, play, and interaction. The Rodina is also interested in the body's place in design, as well as new forms of design practice. In Czech, Rodina means "family." As such, most of their design projects are community-oriented and explore the future of design with the underlying question, "How do we as designers contribute to society?"

The Rodina most recently created a series of highly experimental projects, exploring the possibilities of integrating performance into design. They are choosing to break away from the conventions associated with design, such as a static visual with accompanying text. In 2015 they started researching performativity within graphic design and coined the term "performative design." The Rodina defines performativity as "active bodies," which can be real people, as well as virtual bodies/avatars doing various activities and collaborating to create change.

The goal is to create change in a bigger sense externally by being active, but also to gain inner transformation as people. Illustrating this point, they said that, "Performativity is unrepeatable and very unique." "This transformation is not visible during performance, but it is happening internally." The transformation that they are referring to is the



*Screenshot from The Rodina's lecture, "Togetherness"*



*An example of "performative design"*



**Unionize—Abolish The Stage of Precarity, 2018**

transformation of self. The ideology behind this concept reminds me of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy on freedom and action. Sartre believed that existence is freedom, but freedom comes with a set of responsibilities, and The Rodina uses their design process to encourage collaboration, activism, and participation so that individuals can create their freedom and discover their authentic selves to break free from the constraints of capitalism.

Through this series of projects, the Rodina asks: "How can design lead to the transformation of the self?" The pair have been inspired by several projects by other artists, designers, and movements that pushed performance to radical extremes including art writer Lucy Lippard, as well as Ben Patterson, John Cage, Augusto Ball, and Yoko Ono who were involved in the Fluxus movement. The Rodina use these influences to make their recipes for conceptual frameworks in their practice, creating new forms of design. For example, Ben Patterson designed performative games and playgrounds, such as A Penny for Your Thoughts which was one of his last performances in 2013 at High Line in New York, where he initiated an exchange between the artist and viewer offering participants hats made out of newspaper in exchange for ideas. The Rodina built off this idea by creating their own physical and virtual playgrounds, which are interactive community spaces that initiate dialogue and discourse. One such space *Unionize—Abolish The Stage of Precarity, 2018*. The performance space is a response to the current labor conditions in the creative industry and includes a performance piece that Tereza Ruller performs inside of the space. In the performance, Ruller showcases the exhausting nature of a creative freelancer's life and how it is often filled with uncertainty, low pay, and self-exploitation. It involves Ruller imprisoning herself on a large shelf

sometimes for more than six hours a day to express the constricting and claustrophobic feelings that creatives experience in their working conditions.

The structure is made up of tight metal Ikea shelving units and is designed to look like a physical representation of an online spreadsheet that designers often use for project management and to keep track of accounts. Ruller spends the duration of the performance reorganizing multi-colored tokens that are supposed to measure her 'work performance.' She wanted to be able to use her body to be physically present to interact with her audience and during the performance she engages with visitors, initiating discussions on the inequities in the creative industry. So far it has been installed and performed at De School Gallery in Amsterdam, and Copenhagen's Chart Art and Design Book Fair. The playgrounds are designed to be safe spaces for experimental action, mapping, and dialogue, focusing on the importance of participation and how it is key for humanity and the development of an empathic society. Reshaping and rethinking culture norms, power structures, and events within the group of participants through dialogue and activities involving interacting with the spaces and becoming part of the performances.

Later, they went on to do another playground project titled *Map of Voices, 2020* which is currently on view at Van Abbe museum in The Netherlands. The installation uses several influential female voices who are mainly activists fighting for racial and non-binary equality including Angela Davis and Octavia Butler, and you can enter the space through pillars where the voices of these women are gathered together and designed to sound like they are in conversation with one another.



**Map of Voices, 2020**

Lastly, The Rodina showed a publication exploring the intersection of feminism and Afro-futurism titled *The Noise of Being* in collaboration with Sonic Acts, an interdisciplinary arts organization in Amsterdam. Rather than pursuing a traditional publication, they turned the spreads of the book into walls—the book transformed into an environment, becoming a meta book as this form challenged traditional notions of what a book is and should be. Through this project, they asked themselves, “How can designers create virtual worlds and proposals for this world we live in? [...] As graphic designers we cut complex content and then find ways to simplify it, but what if we unravel this complexity?”

As a creative design studio, The Rodina asks very important questions and believes that virtual spaces can be more affordable, inclusive, and accessible than galleries and other institutions both due to the lack of physical burdens and financial burdens making them less hierarchical. They want to use their design work to touch people in ways that cannot be measured or defined monetarily. Since January 2020 they have created a total of 900 interactive virtual spaces. This was a very informative lecture for me as a Fine Arts student as I have often associated design with the corporate/commercial world. This kind of conceptual thinking could revolutionize design as a whole and move it away from this cold, static, and corporate stereotype connected to capitalist production. The Rodina has successfully integrated elements of the fine arts such as performance and community arts to amplify the importance of empathy, community building, and activism within the field of design to resist the repressive nature of capitalism by using imagination, and sculpting and creating new physical and virtual realms.



**The Noise of Being by Sonic Acts, 2017**



**Screenshot of The Rodina's lecture, "Togetherness"**



**Isha Tripathi** is an interdisciplinary artist who primarily works with drawing, painting, and photography. She is currently a graduating senior at CCA, pursuing a BFA in Painting and Drawing. Recently she worked as an Archives Assistant at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, and is currently the Community Arts and Development Intern at Southern Exposure in San Francisco.