



Deeply Superficial

An operational contemporary
portrait system for image,
video, sound and
gesture from
data.

Nicolas Delaleu



The Question

For much of their history, images have been understood as representations. Whether painted, photographed or filmed, they were expected to depict a world that preceded them.

Increasingly, however, images emerge from systems operating on information. Scientific imaging, computational models, classification systems and statistical methods have transformed images from representations into instruments through which knowledge is organized and produced.

Deeply Superficial examines this transformation by asking:

What happens when images are no longer representations, but are produced by systems operating on data?

Deeply Superficial approaches this question through portraiture.

Working from functional genomic data derived from human brain tissue, the project constructs a system through which biological information becomes spatial, visual and sonic form. Yet genomics is not the subject of the work. Rather, it provides a contemporary setting in which broader transformations in the nature of images become visible.

Deeply Superficial proposes that images increasingly function as manifestations of interpretive systems. The project explores what becomes visible when images no longer primarily describe the world, but reveal the operations through which it is rendered intelligible.

Historical Conditions

Human beings have long relied on organized visual systems to make the world intelligible.

Naming, classification, mapping, measurement and portraiture have each provided ways of transforming complexity into structured forms of knowledge. These systems do not merely describe reality; they participate in producing the conditions under which reality becomes knowable.

Photography occupies an important position within this history. From nineteenth-century scientific imaging to twentieth-century typological archives, images increasingly functioned not only as representations but also as instruments for organizing knowledge about the world and about human beings.

Contemporary computational systems extend this trajectory. Information becomes measurable, comparable and navigable through increasingly complex forms of organization. Images are no longer solely products of observation. They emerge through operations performed on data.

Deeply Superficial is situated within this historical transformation.

Rather than using data to illustrate scientific knowledge, *Deeply Superficial* constructs a contemporary portrait system in which images arise from the encounter between individuals and an interpretive framework derived from molecular biology. The resulting works investigate how images participate in the production of intelligibility and how changing systems of knowledge alter what becomes visible about the human.

Configuration 1 Galaxy

Photographs taken within its photorealistic, to-scale 3D model
 $7 \times 7 \times 3.5 \text{ m}$ (L $\times$ W $\times$ H)

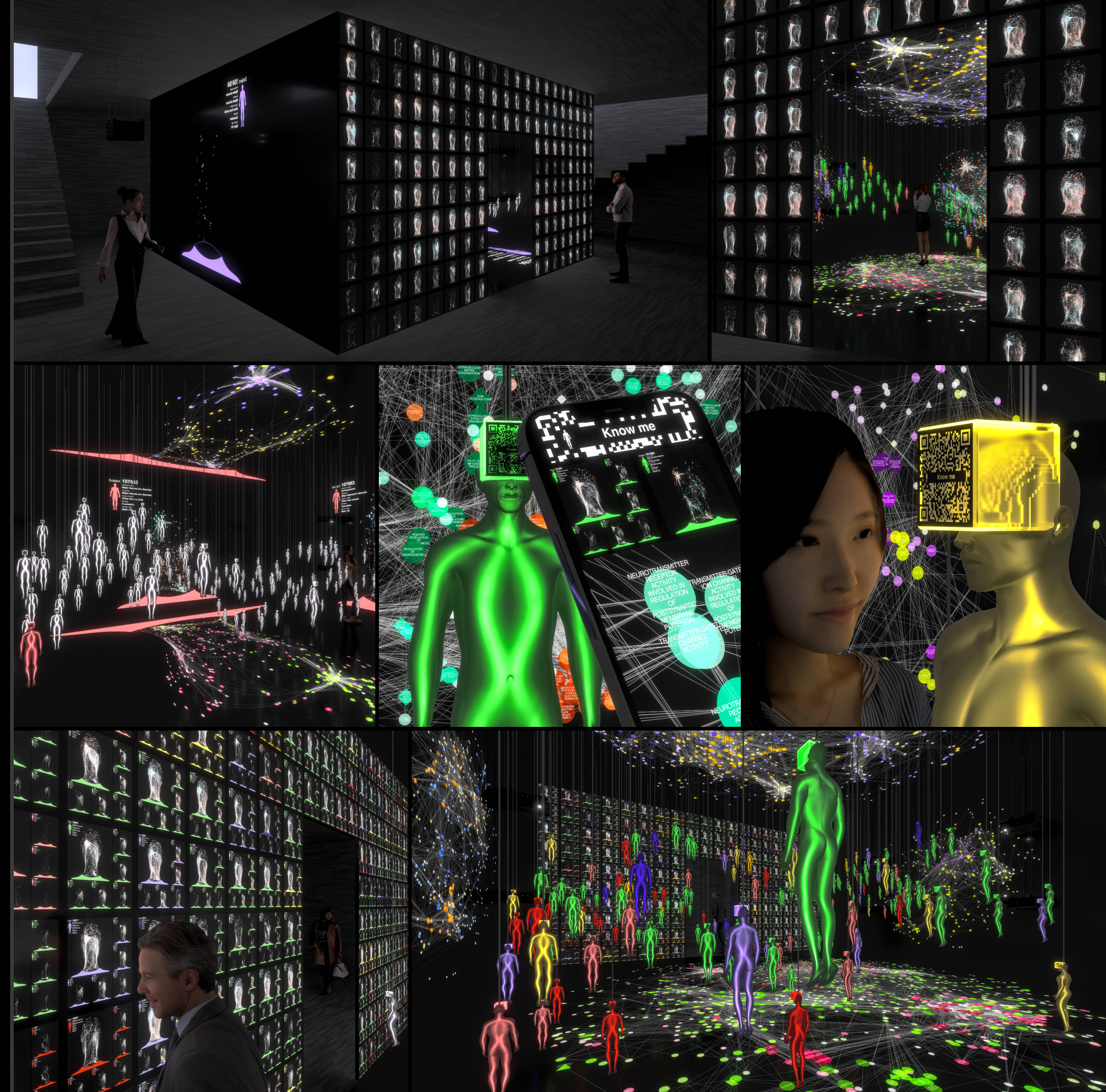
Navigate a distributed spatial configuration of the system

This configuration presents the system in a distributed spatial form, where each subject is positioned within a shared structure defined by measurable differences within the data.

As the system progresses, subjects are sequentially activated through a combination of sound and image. Multiple molecular portraits are projected simultaneously, mapping distinct aspects of each subject's relation to the remaining population.

These portraits emerge, transform and dissolve over time, revealing both their structure and their limits.

The experience centers on navigating a continuous spatial process, culminating in a final prompt that shifts the encounter back to the viewer.



Configuration 2 Floating Portraits

Photographs taken within a photorealistic, to-scale 3D model
 $12 \times 12 \times 2.25$ m (L $\times$ W $\times$ H)

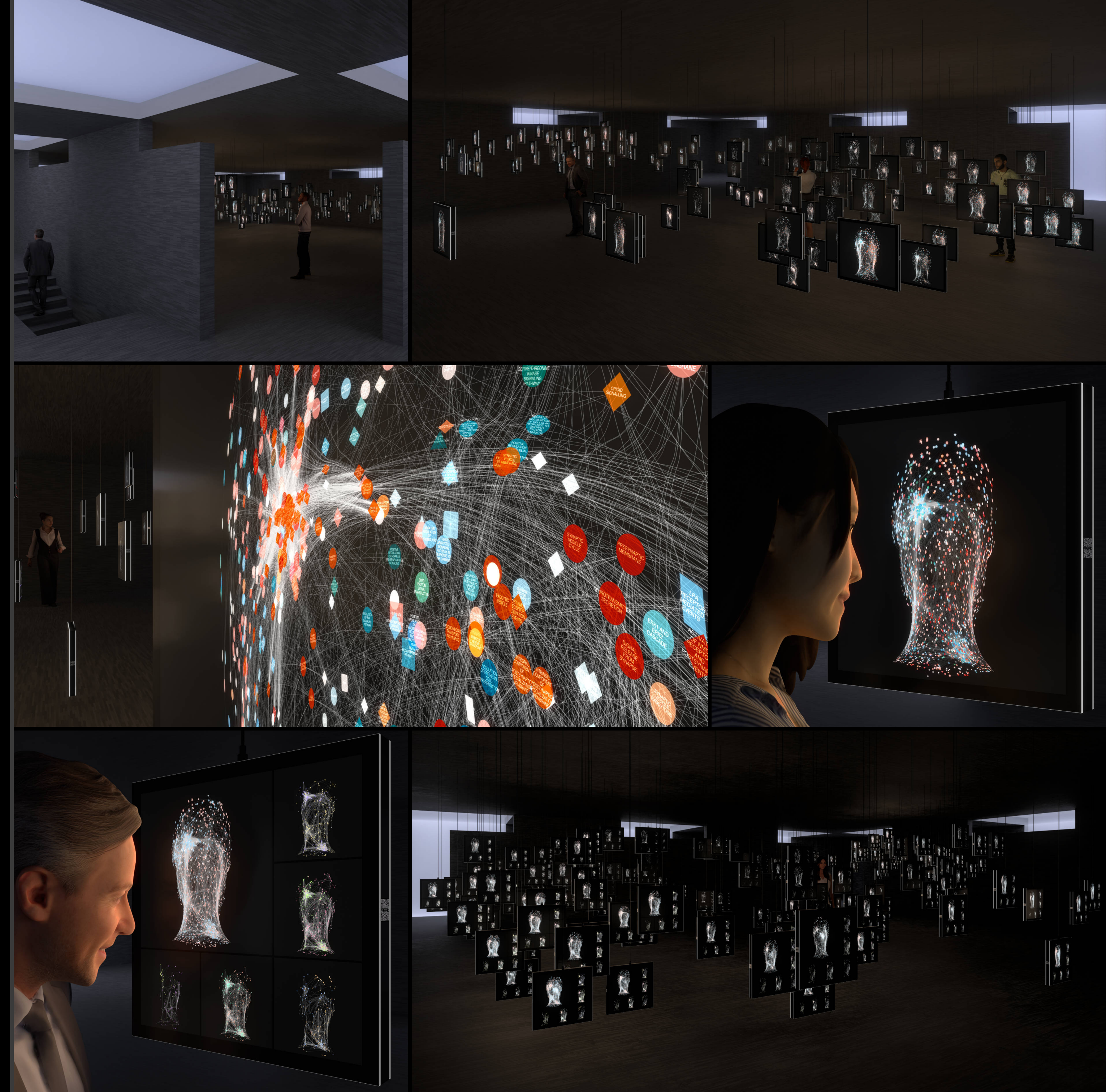
Encounter an object-based configuration of the system

This configuration reconstitutes the system across individual objects, preserving each subject's position within a shared structure derived from the dataset.

Molecular portraits are integrated into each panel, condensing multiple facets of the subject into two surfaces. One side presents a composite portrait in which multiple molecular states intersect, while the other side unfolds these components.

Subjects are activated sequentially through pulsing light and sound, shifting emphasis from spatial distribution to temporal intensity.

The experience moves from navigating a distributed environment to encountering a series of discrete presences, establishing a slower and more contemplative rhythm.



Configuration 3 Searchlight

Photographs taken within its photorealistic, to-scale 3D model
 $6 \times 6 \times 3 \text{ m (L} \times \text{W} \times \text{H)}$

Observe the system operate in a planar configuration

This configuration collapses the spatial structure of the dataset into a two-dimensional field in which subjects are positioned based on genomic deviation.

A directed beam traverses this field along an optimized path, sequentially activating each subject.

As each position is scanned, molecular portraits and associated structures are constructed and projected outward, accompanied by the corresponding subject's compressed sound sequence.

Here, the system appears as an operational process rather than an environment, rapidly indexing and exposing each position to observation.

The encounter shifts toward observation, marked by an accelerated and less stable perceptual rhythm.



Configuration 4

A Final Presence (installation)

Video stills from the video shown on the primary screen of the installation
 $4 \times 4 \times 2.25$ m (L $\times$ W $\times$ H)

Remain within a temporal configuration of the system

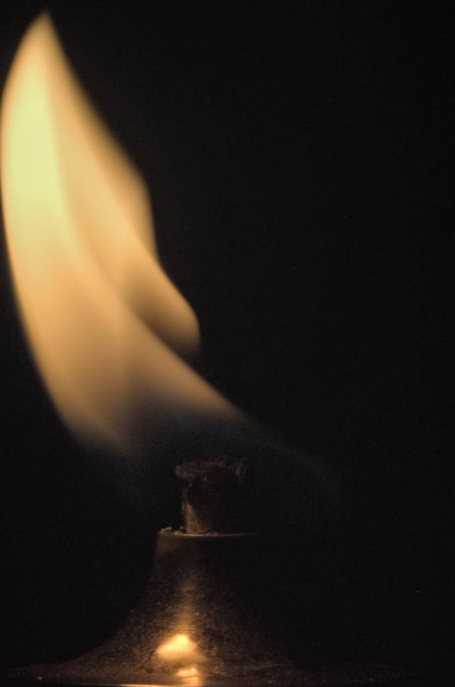
This configuration recasts the system as a continuous temporal sequence, where spatial distance between subjects is translated into intervals of silence of precise duration.

As the system processes each subject, genomic deviation is expressed through a stereo soundscape articulated in pitch and rhythm over time.

The primary screen sustains this perceptual sequence, reducing spatial complexity to a continuous gesture governed by sonified data.

A secondary, optional screen renders the underlying operations of the system, revealing how subjects are positioned, traversed, constructed and sonified.

What remains is not a fixed representation, but a trace that persists without resolving into a stable form.



Configuration 5

A Final Presence (book)

Photographs taken within a photorealistic, to-scale 3D model of the book and media storage device, including installation videos and soundscapes
56 pages, 35 × 35 × 4 cm (L × W × H)

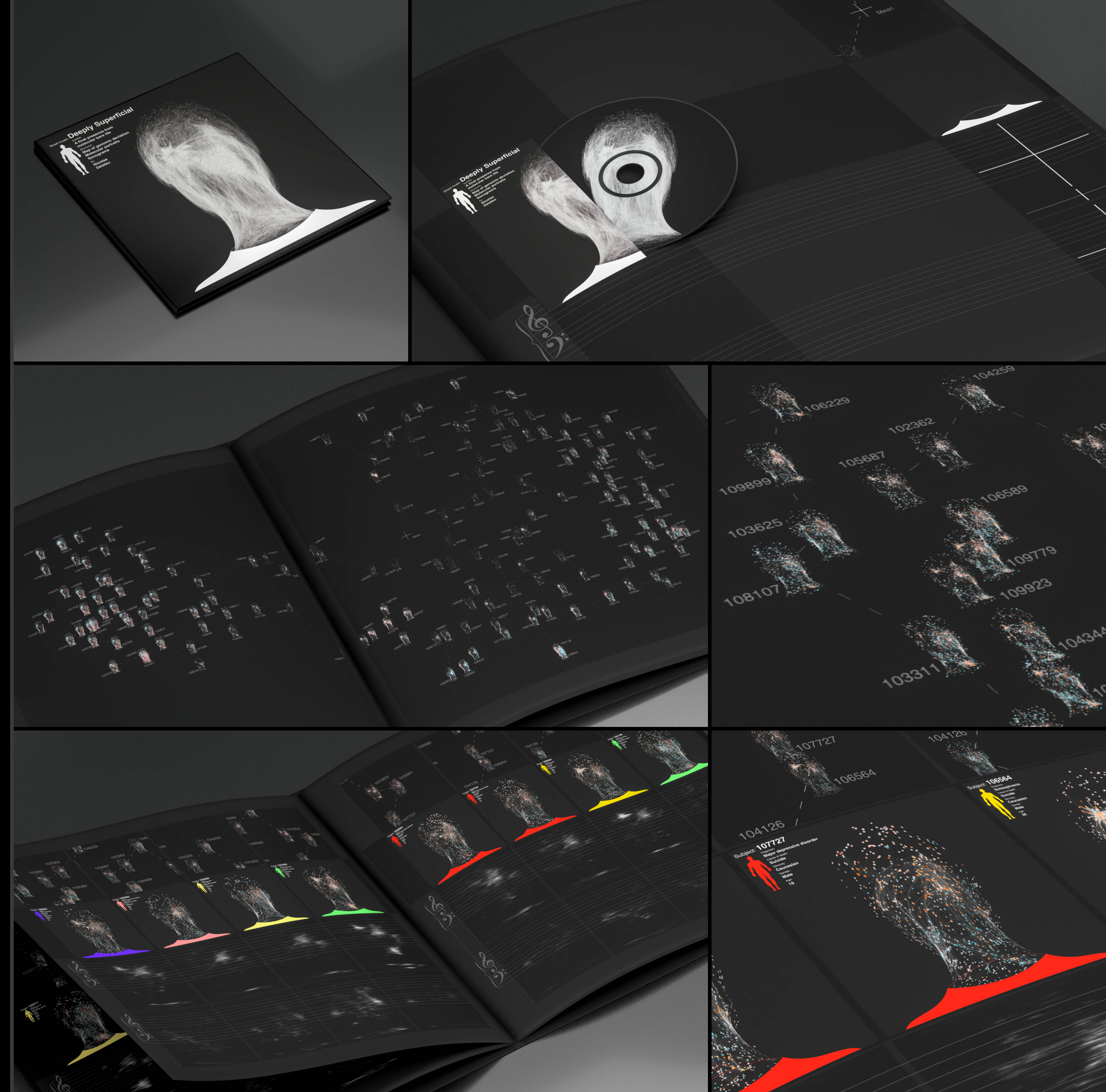
Hold a stabilized configuration of the system

This configuration translates the system into a bounded object, where its structures are fixed within a sequence.

The book condenses the system's spatial and temporal operations into a readable form, preserving the relational positions established within the dataset.

Visual and sonic components are retained as recorded states while remaining legible as structured traces through which the system can be reactivated and performed.

The encounter shifts from duration to retention, where the system is no longer traversed but maintained as a stabilized configuration that retains the conditions of its own execution.



Conditions of Intelligibility

Deeply Superficial operates on publicly available functional genomic data derived from postmortem human brain tissue collected from 172 individuals. The cohort includes subjects with and without a history of mental illness, some of whom died by suicide.

The interpretive framework underlying the project originated within biomedical research, where complex biological states are compared and organized through computational methods. While preserving its operational logic, methodology and precision, the system is relieved of its practical purpose. The subjects remain suspended within a topology of biological relations, becoming intelligible as configurations within a shared relational space structured by similarity and difference.

The biological knowledge underlying this framework has largely emerged from the study of cells, tissues and model organisms. Structures developed to understand biological processes across species are increasingly applied to domains historically approached through psychology, philosophy and lived experience. What emerges is not a replacement of one form of understanding by another, but a changing relationship between them.

The resulting structures are translated into portraits, sound environments, moving images, books and installations. Each manifestation preserves the same internal logic while producing different modes of encounter. The project therefore operates less as a collection of works than as a coherent image-, sound- and video-generating system whose manifestations remain connected through a common epistemic structure.

By suspending utility while preserving operational rigor, *Deeply Superficial* invites viewers to encounter a mode of knowing through which human beings increasingly become intelligible as biological configurations while remaining irreducible to them.

Statement

I'm interested in the provisionality of what is and in the fragility of making sense of the world.

My work develops systems that generate structured forms from data. These systems organize relations across scientific, visual and cultural domains, creating conditions through which the world may become intelligible. The resulting forms remain contingent, making perceptible the frameworks through which reality is organized rather than reality itself.

About

Nicolas Delaleu is an artist and scientist based in Lausanne, Switzerland and Nice, France.

Trained in bioengineering and experimental immunology, his work builds on a longstanding engagement with genomics, systems biology and data-driven modelling, including leading roles in academic research and industry, where he currently serves as Director and Head of Computational Biology & AI.

In parallel, he has developed an artistic practice centered on systems that transform data into spatial, visual and sonic configurations. Drawing on methods originating in the life sciences, his work investigates how organized visual and spatial forms participate in constructing intelligibility and how changing systems of knowledge shape what becomes visible, knowable and experienceable.

Initially trained in photography, he expanded his practice into relational installations through his participation in Klavdij Sluban's LeMasterklass.

His projects situate contemporary operational systems within a broader history of images, classifications, maps and archives through which human beings have sought to understand themselves and the world.



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