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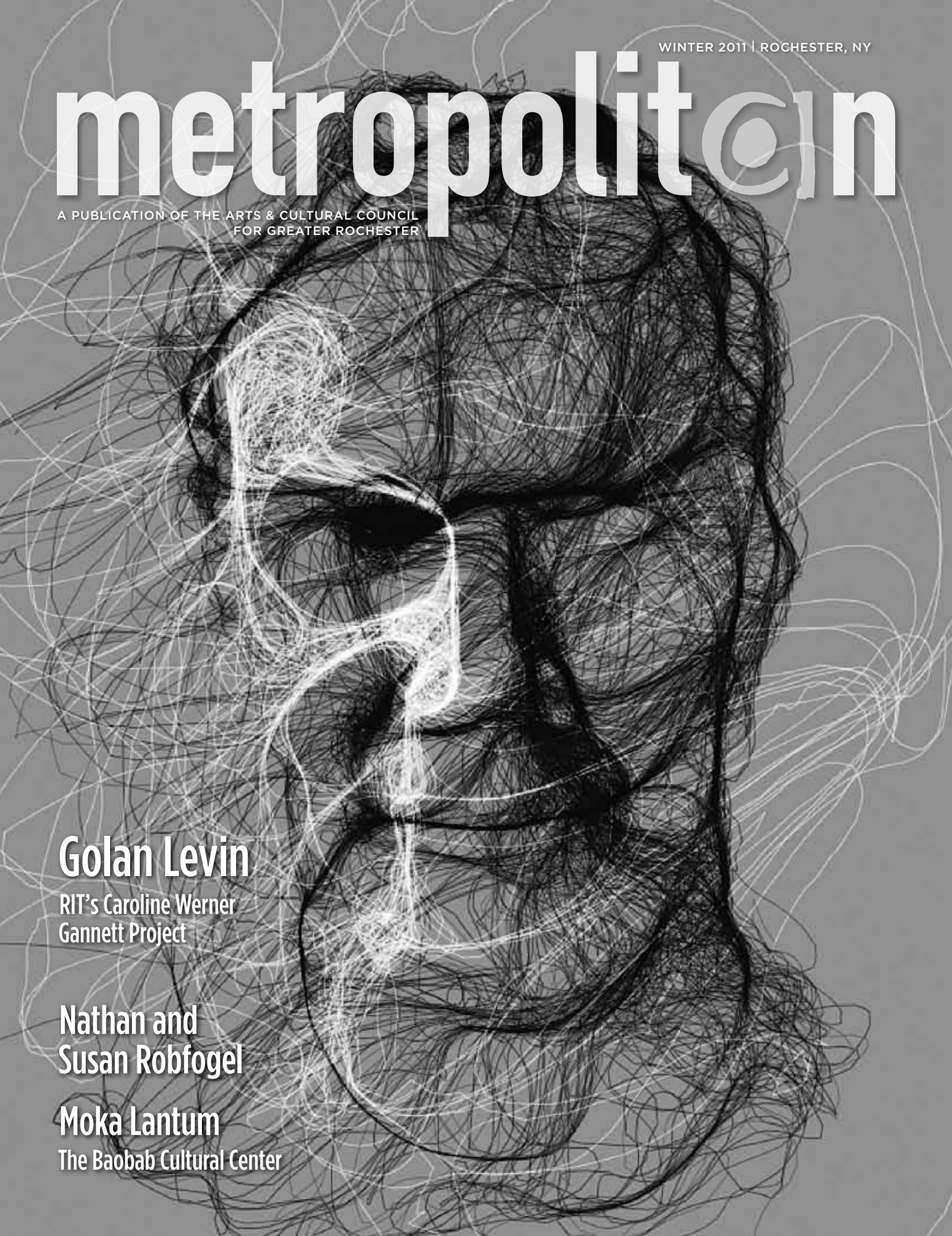
A PUBLICATION OF THE ARTS & CULTURAL COUNCIL
FOR GREATER ROCHESTER

Golan Levin

RIT's Caroline Werner
Gannett Project

**Nathan and
Susan Robfogel**

Moka Lantum
The Baobab Cultural Center



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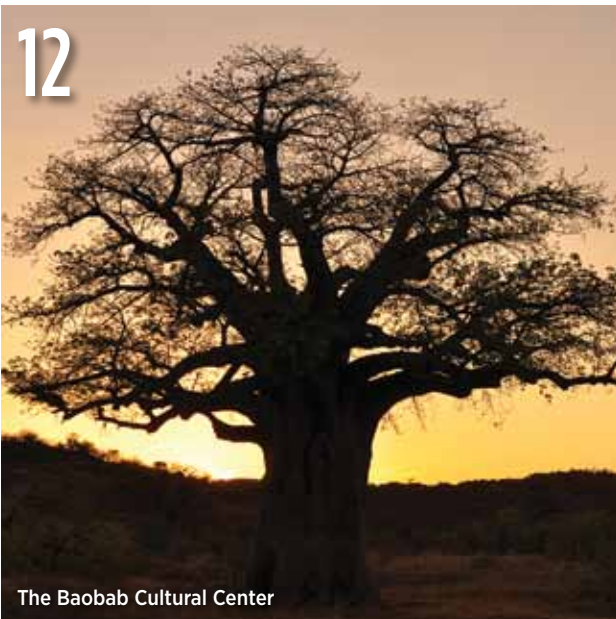
Confused by an Unexpected Moment of Introspection (detail), © 2010 Howard Koft

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New York State Literary Center

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The Baobab Cultural Center

IMAGES COURTESY OF HOWARD KOFT (TOP), NEW YORK STATE LITERARY CENTER (MIDDLE), ISTOCKPHOTO (BOTTOM)

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Floccular Portrait of Ben Fry, image by, and courtesy of, Golan Levin (www.flong.com). Levin has developed a model for "representing the underlying structure of 'physical' lines," which has the effect of "simulating the tensile properties of thin physical filaments, such as hairs or twigs." He has used this model to create a series of reactive drawing systems. According to Levin, "filaments drawn by the user are buffeted by forces derived from a hidden but underlying photograph. The results are wispy, organic and sometimes unsettling transformations: chiaroscuro in hair." Levin is being brought to Rochester this March by RIT's Caroline Werner Gannett Project, as part of its *Visionaries in Motion* speaker series. See story on page 14 and visit www.cwgp.org.

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LEADING CULTURAL INVESTIGATION

RIT's Caroline Werner Gannett Project and Carnegie Mellon's Golan Levin

By Sarah E. Lentini

“PROGRAM OR BE PROGRAMMED.” Golan Levin talks with the rapid-fire speech and affect of a native New Yorker. The words—provocative and cautionary—are the title of Douglas Rushkoff's new book, which Levin has been reading. We are discussing technology's impact on culture—which he defines as “modes of human expression.”

Levin is being brought to Rochester in March by the Caroline Werner Gannett Project of the Rochester Institute of Technology, a sophisticated initiative that is part think tank, part speaker and discussion series, headed by Dr. Mary Lynn Broe, the Caroline Werner Gannett Professor of Humanities. Working with an impressive cross-disciplinary team of experts from both within and outside of the university, Dr. Broe regularly showcases a variety of individuals with groundbreaking ideas from across the world. In 2011, in addition to Golan Levin, she has lined up an eclectic group of speakers that includes composer David Liptak, storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and popular science writer David Bainbridge.

A graduate of MIT's renowned Media Laboratory, where he designed his own interdisciplinary degree program, Golan Levin now directs the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University, which “supports

atypical, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional research at the intersection of arts, sciences, technology and culture.” Levin's lab provides residencies to support the work of “artist-engineer hybrids”—artists who create circuits and write computer code in order to create new forms of art.

Early on, Levin worked in Silicon Valley, at Interval Research Corporation, a company that brought together artists and scientists to develop many of the significant new technologies that have redefined our daily existence. “It was a very interesting place,” he tells me.

Unwarped Flowers, what one would see from inside a flower, by Golan Levin and Kyle McDonald (above and page 16); Meshy, an interactive drawing environment, by Golan Levin (below).

“What I think characterizes most of the best media laboratories is a recognition of the feedback loop that exists between culture and technology. New technology makes possible new forms of culture. Likewise, culture sets the agenda for the development of new technologies.

One of the most profound ways that new culture is made today is through software.” I ask for some examples and he replies, “There are thousands of examples. It's not just *Facebook*—it's your toaster, your car. *Wikipedia*, a document authored by millions of people, is one thousand times bigger than the largest encyclopedia we had up until now, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Artists must have a voice in defining how culture is shaped by software.”

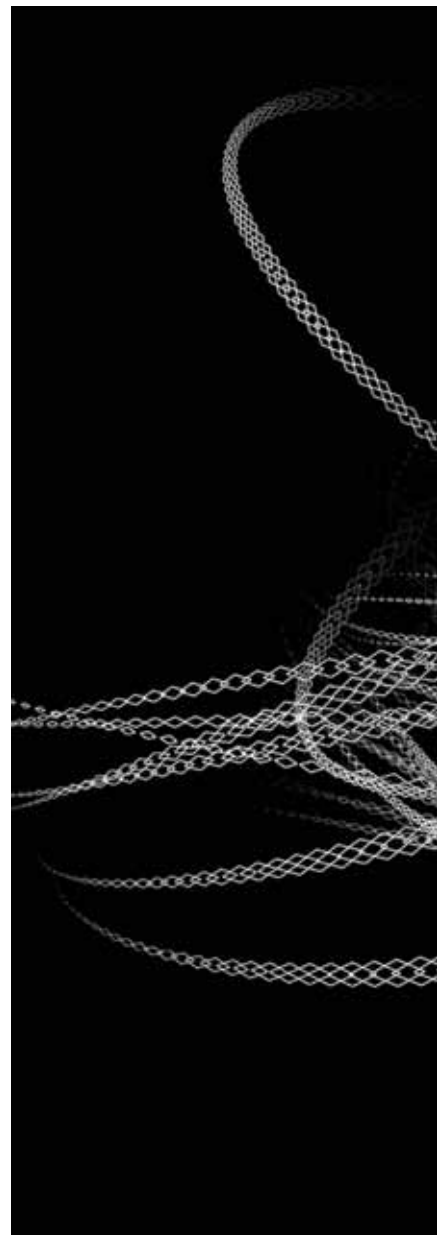
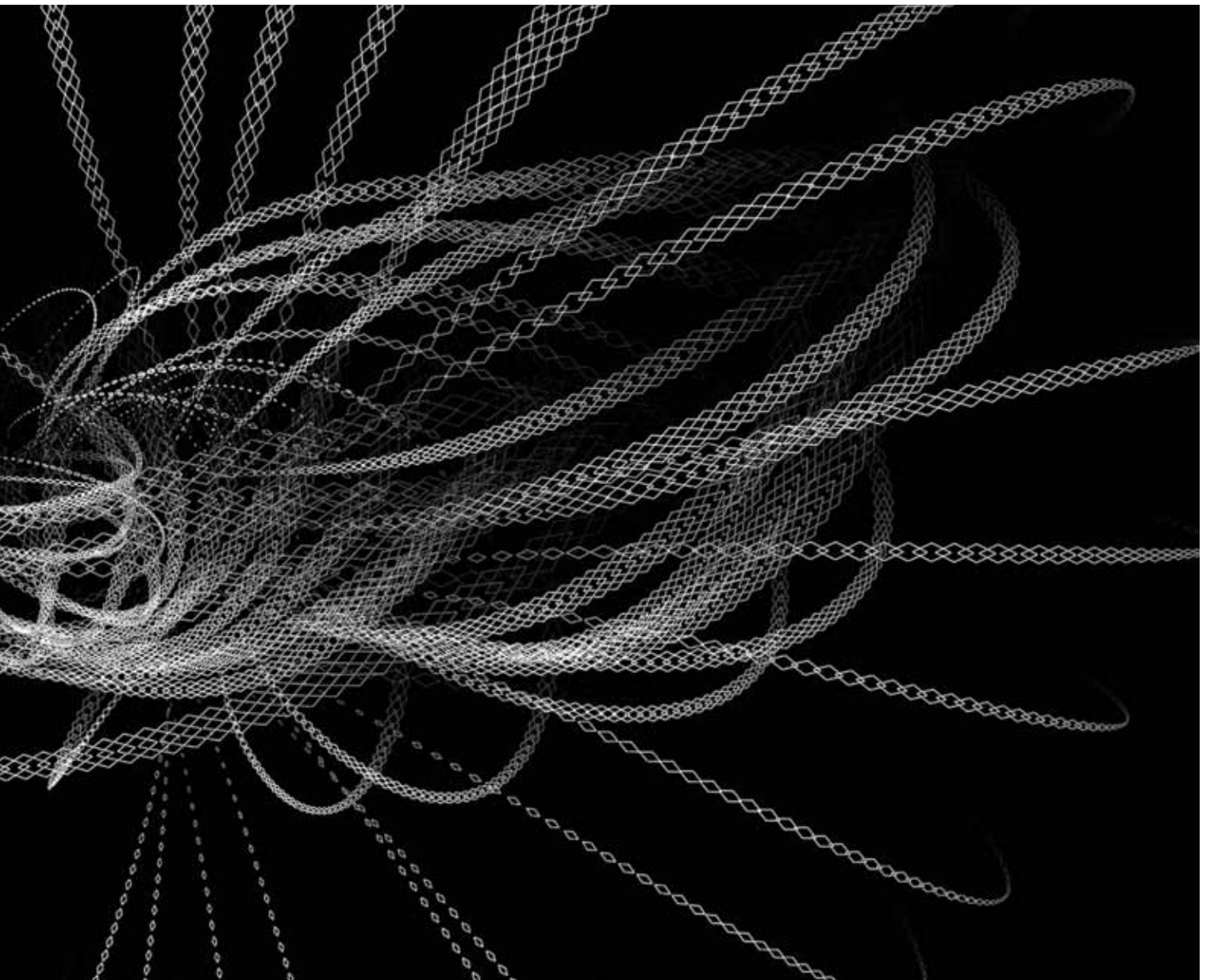
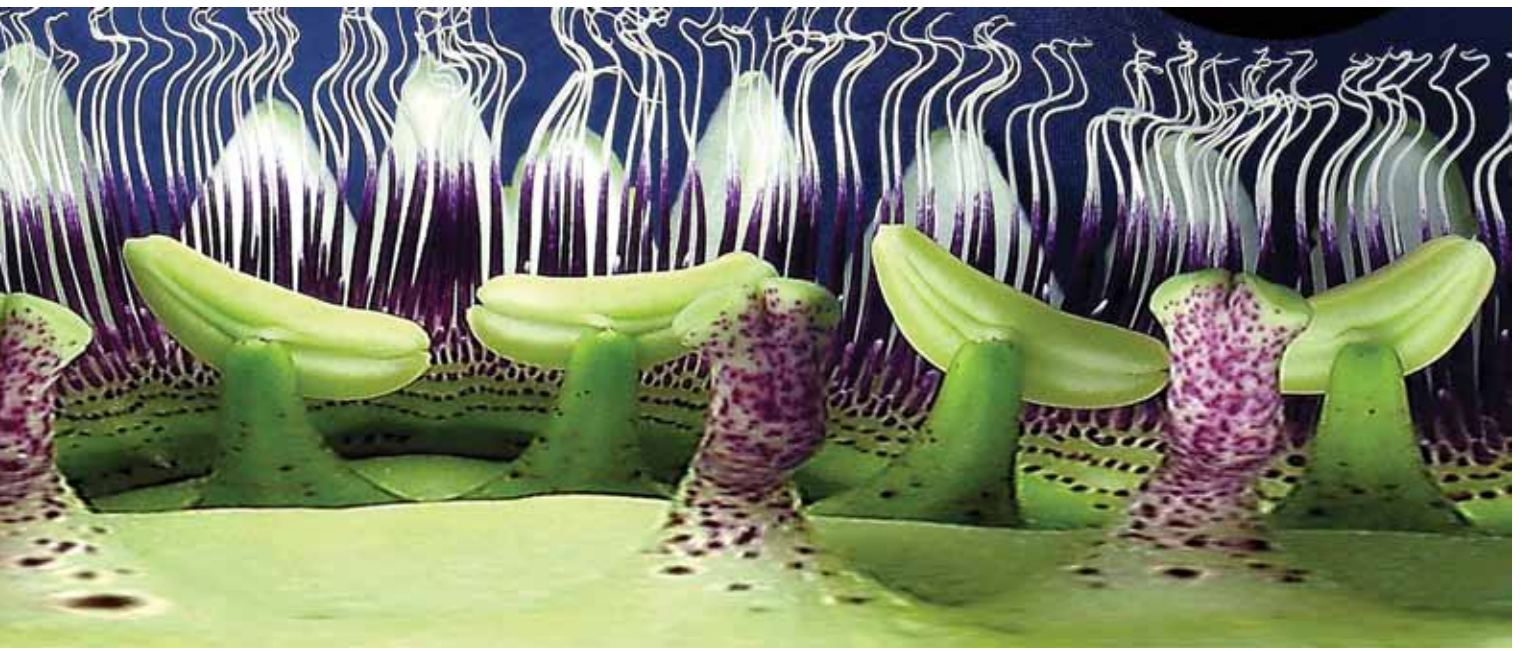


IMAGE BY GOLAN LEVIN AND KYLE McDONALD (TOP); IMAGE COURTESY OF GOLAN LEVIN (BOTTOM)





Levin is a professor—an educator—who teaches artists how to write software and teaches computer scientists how to “get in touch with their own idiosyncratic ideas.” According to Levin, in the future, the arts will produce very different aesthetic expressions, constructed and experienced in ways that are entirely different, and distributed many places simultaneously.

He tells me that he is perhaps best known as a computer artist, a new media artist, although he is also a designer, a composer, a performer, a scientist, and an engineer. “Part of the problem is the words we use,” says Levin. “I’m not too interested in categories.”

I tell him that I have become increasingly interested in the power of language to shape thinking.

“I am an artist and a designer,” Levin continues. “There is no one word in English that encompasses the role. There is a German word, *gestalter*, which I like—I am someone who gives form to things.”

“There are disciplinary boundaries. The most interesting work is at the boundaries.”

Levin is such an unconventional thinker that it prompts me to ask what he was like as a child. “I can’t answer that,” he says. “I don’t have an adult perspective on myself as a child.” He pauses and then continues, “I made a lot of art.”

Levin attended Stuyvesant High School, a public math and science magnet school in New York City. Levin’s mother is an artist and an educator; his father is an engraver and a craftsman.

I ask him what conclusions he is drawing—on where we are going

and what it means. “It’s hard to have that kind of perspective. We’re standing on constantly shifting ground. But we are without question in the middle of a profound cultural shift, as significant as the printing revolution in the sixteenth century.”

As I listen and repeat these words in my head, it occurs to me that we appear to be experiencing a “virtual” geological event. Perhaps, as with so many other human activities, we have moved into a new geological era, one that exists in the ether.

I picture tectonic plates—the earth—moving under us, as they have done so many times before, as they are always doing—imperceptibly moving and changing in ways that are at once small and large, leaving us different and the same.

For, the core idea of needing to shape the design of our world in order to have power and freedom and happiness is not a new one; it is, however, being expressed within a new context and in a new language. ©

Visionaries in Motion Speaker Series

CAROLINE WERNER GANNETT PROJECT/ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

- Golan Levin: *Interactive Art and Speculative Human-Computer Interaction*, March 8 at 8 PM—RIT, Webb Auditorium (Building 7A)
- For information, call (585) 475-7174 or visit www.cwgp.org
- All events are free and open to the public