

MELT (REN LOREN BRITTON AND IZ PAEHR) — UNFORGETTING AS CARING:
 BRAILLE 'N SPEAK, ZENITH HEARING AID, AND FTM ISSUE NO. 45

What was the starting point of your research project?

The Imagining Backwards Computer (IBC) is connected to our ongoing research on the relationship between time and data. We engage imagination as a practice that allows for the shifting of existing paradigms, meaning that we move away from a coordinate system that understands ableism as its point zero. When researching what imagining backwards might mean from trans* and disabled perspectives, we soon found that the hacks and technologies that disabled people invent or use are often disappeared from the technoscientific canon— such as early handheld computers that read braille aloud. For the IBC, we developed the method of appreciation x-ward in time—resisting the damage that has erased disabled and trans* experiences from archives and other forms of remembrance, and instead affirming complex histories in which technologies have played ambivalent roles, at times reinscribing ableist norms of what a body can do, and at others opening up possibilities for less normative ways of relating. The IBC lays bare these conditions of exclusion and gestures toward alternative pathways for pasts, presents, and futures that do not uphold archives as places of belonging but instead position them as complex forms of longing. From there, we asked how we might un-forget artefacts, and what reimagining them might make possible.

What has been your approach for the fellowship research project and how does it relate to the role of research in your practice?

We engaged a mixed approach in developing the research project. We worked in the form of workshops to develop and practice a method we call “writing letters of appreciation” in which we prompted participants to choose and appreciate artefacts. The project also ran in conversation with a larger strand of research called “Counting Feelings” in which we used material and sensorial

How to unforget a past? How to time travel to different trans*crip histories?

In this video and letter-of-appreciation series we consider archival artefacts from disability and trans* histories (not “his-”, but a gender neutral “hir-”). This video addresses what happens when one reaches back in time to find resonant experiences and expressions, some of which are difficult to hold. By writing letters of appreciation to these community-based publications and technologies that (sometimes) made access, we hold community and access making work tenderly alongside the difficulty of ableisms and audisms that structure why some assistive technologies have been made in the first place. Here we share three letters and some stills from our video that hold space for moving backwards in time, tenderly.



MELT (Ren Loren Britton & Iz Paehr), Unforgetting as Caring: Braille 'n' Speak, Zenith Hearing Aid, FTM issue no. 45, 2023, video still
 Image Description: Many plastic, wooden, and digital elements dance across the frame, which is a still from a video by MELT. On the right side of the still are two clocks, one with two hands pointing at about 14:24, and another shaped like an hourglass, mid turn. In the background of the image are two contact lenses made from clay filling almost the entire frame of the shot. In front of them is a plastic bag holding pieces of fabric and getting filled to the brim with scraps. Subtitles on the bottom of the screen read “With much love.”

Dear FTM issue no. 45,

You appear as a black-and-white scan in the digital Trans*gender archive to us, and are from 1999. As a newsletter you were published by an organization originating in the United States, FTM (Female to Male) International, moving from this site and connecting communities of FTM folk

elements to reimagine what data might come to mean when refigured from trans* and autistic embodiments. In relation to this project we began working with materials as well to build haptic bridges into the past.

How does MELT engage with or critique the domain of technoscience in their work, and how does this engagement inform its understanding and representation of disability within the broader sociotechnical discourse?

We approach technoscience and technologies from an anti-ableist perspective. With anti-ableist technologies we conceptualize and prototype technologies that actively intervene into ableist conditions. Projects of ours that do so are for example ACCESS SERVER and Counting Feelings. With the IBC we take up space in backward computational hirstories and reclaim or speculatively rewrite narratives that have been underattended to.

Can you discuss the research project you did during your fellowship at Sandberg and how your design-research engagements have intersected with disability justice to foster a more inclusive or accessible discourse within the design community or public sphere?

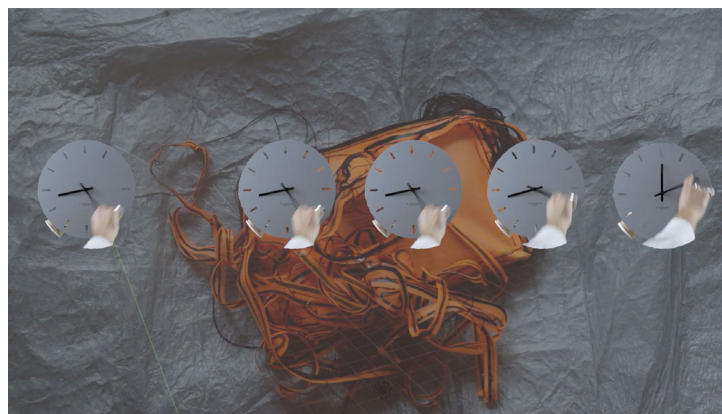
In line with Disability Justice our research projects aims to uphold disabled experiences and make access to knowing-making one's hirstories. We make contributions to shaping design discourse by holding workshops in which this knowing-making as well as the naming and shifting of barriers becomes a shared activity. Another axis is placing access and multi-modality at the heart of our design practice. During the fellowship show we will open a public online text channel to make space for other ways of socializing than in-person participation.

across locales. Your logo engages triangles: one is holding an "F" and is positioned pointing up, and one is holding an "M" with the pointy side facing downward. If this is a link to body shapes, we feel less sure about it, so we made a transformation of your logo and have sewn it together as a way of appreciating your shape-shifting qualities.

Thank you for teaching us about the long arch of building transformational movements. As you write: "... to build a transformational movement, we must take the risks that challenge conventional thinking. When the forces against us are strong, the response cannot be fear and political expediency ... Over the years we have not wavered and ultimately our vision has often prevailed." This political articulation helps us to understand how building transformational movements is an ongoing and long-term project, that we continue today, 23 years later. In this moment of pain and grief, we face political unrest and continued loss of rights for trans* and disabled people. You help us remember that we have access to inter-generational, time-traveling, and supportive community and that our resistance is ongoing.

Imagining back into the summer of 1999, we love that you used two (!!) exclamation marks in the heading of "SUMMER READING ISSUE!!" Very motivating to read in the heat. And we love the sliding-scale prices for a subscription to make access possible across class. We were surprised to see the metrics of calculation that you have been using to look into demographics across the trans* community you are part of. It's so great that you are thinking about intersections between asexuality and bisexuality, lesbian, gay, and hetero orientations. We appreciate your approach to naming through graph-making, and we wonder, all these years later, can graphical metrics of accounting for our experiences make political change?

With much love and appreciation,
Ren & Iz



MELT (Ren Loren Britton & Iz Paehr), Unforgetting as Caring: Braille n' Speak, Zenith Hearing Aid, FTM issue no. 45, 2023, video still

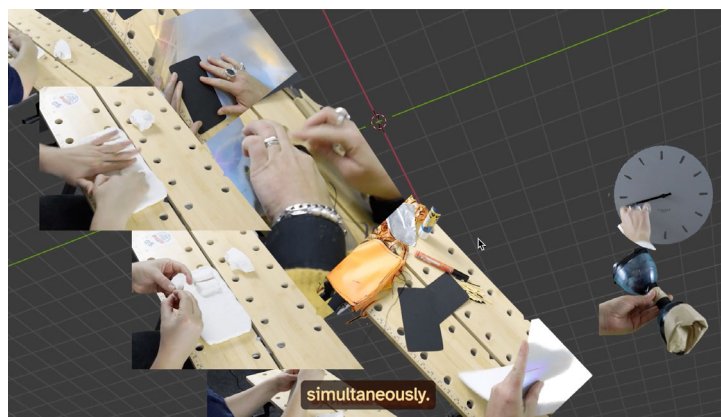
Image Description: A fused plastic background merges with a digital grid to form the background upon which a sculpture that resembles the Zenith Hearing Aid from 1949 sits. This is a still from a video by MELT. Many cables weave above the battery pack; they look messy. In the foreground, five round clocks are each being pushed by a finger, moving the time that the clock's hands depict: each are frozen in time at a different moment.

Dear Braille 'n Speak,

You were first built in 1987, a few years before my life started and more than a decade before computers entered households in the small city I grew up in—or so I thought: Marburg is home to Germany's only higher-education school for blind and low-vision folks, some of whom may or may not have had access to you. And what else could we call you if not an early handheld computer? I'm writing this letter to un-forget you. About your purpose, your makers wrote in a very long manual for the Braille 2000: "The Braille 'n Speak is a computer that lets you write in braille and responds to you with speech. It translates Grade 2 or Grade 1 braille text – even computer braille text – into spoken words through its built-in speech synthesizer." It further explains that this version of you could store the equivalent of 740 physical pages of braille in your random-access memory. This manual is a work of poetry in itself: describing you haptically instead of visually, as your looks—though elegant—were not how you were perceived by your users. You had seven long buttons: six of them were arranged vertically, one horizontally. On your left side, there were customized serial ports, as USB had not been invented yet, as well as a power charger. On your right, you offered a power switch and a headphone socket. The dots of braille were distributed across your buttons, and with that, you held a whole world of dots, letters, words, sentences in the palm of your processing unit! You were flat, because when writing braille, people's hands are flat. This I learned from an interview with your inventor Deane Blazie who references his work with Tim Cranmer, Fred Gissoni, and Judy Dixon—all brilliant blind people in technoscience. Judy Dixon is an expert in un-forgetting: on her website, she has archived 283 Braille and Other Tactile-Writing devices.

Braille 'n Speak, when I try to un-forget your role in technoscience hirstory, you make me think of longing more than belonging. I wish I had access to your engineering manual to retrace your circuits, but they seem lost to time.

For now, I hope we stay in touch,
Iz



MELT (Ren Loren Britton & Iz Paehr), Unforgetting as Caring: Braille 'n Speak, Zenith Hearing Aid, FTM issue no. 45, 2023, video still

Image Description: A digital-grid background extends in the distance, namespace is suggested by the X and Y axes that stretch out in this still, which is from a video by MELT. On the left side of the image, many hands work on a wooden surface, assembling different technologies. The innards of the Braille 'n Speak are being modeled out of clay, and the innards of the Zenith Hearing Aid are being constructed out of reflective and absorptive papers. On the right side of the image are two clocks: one with two hands pointing at about 20:43, another shaped like an hourglass, mid turn. Subtitles on the bottom of the screen read "simultaneously."

Dear Hearing Aid made by Zenith from 1949,

I am writing to recognize all of your work and worlding that connects vacuum tube technologies and creates pathways of access that are difficult to hold, informed by ableist audism and by potential access-making. I was drawn to you when engaging with the EveryBody: An Artifact History of Disability in America online exhibition because you reminded me of early cochlear implant technologies that required heavy battery packs to be carried around when in use. When I was younger, I lived with my brother who is Deaf, and my mother and I would sew blue Velcro pockets into all of my brother's clothing—running the sewing machine across pocket-making-fabrics to make what my mother thought was access for my brother. You hold the complication of access-making with you as a technology. So many technologies are made with technoableist frameworks, not by disabled or Deaf people but by non-disabled people who assume what we might need to live in this cruel world. In my nuclear family we were bi-lingual, speaking American Sign Language (manualism) and Spoken English (oralism) simultaneously. However, because of your further development into things like cochlear implants, you perform what many refer to as a cultural genocide, disrespecting what some Deaf communities would wish for: to have their language respected and for the curative imaginary to stay far away. This impacted my extended family, who remained stuck in oralism, never learning American Sign Language, even though a person with a different language lived in their family.

You are a complicated technology, and I have complicated feelings about you, and your audist lineage. Sign Languages and situated Deaf communities' wishes are to be respected. When I research early hearing aids, I feel my brother's frustration of carrying these technologies around, and my frustration with my parents for never having taken the time to consider how to think with disability differently.

Sincerely,
Ren



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Image Description: A warm brown background holds multiple reflections of sewing machines stitching a plastic as if it were a fabric. This is a still from a video by MELT. The image is divided into four segments: each depicts an individual frame of view showing a sewing machine, operated by people's hands, sewing together pieces of bright orange plastic—making simulations of artifacts from disabled and trans* archival hirstory. Overlaid upon these four segments, on the right side of the image, is one clock whose hands are being pushed around by a human hand. It currently points at 17:15. Subtitles on the bottom of the screen read "your role in technoscience hirstory."