CASE STUDY

KAMIL NAWRATIL & ZYIA ZHANG

Interactive Entrepreneur Connects With a Collaborator in the MFA Program

Working with clients like Audi, Microsoft and Nike, as well as numerous artists, agencies and brands, Brooklyn-based Volvox Labs designs and fabricates interactive environments. As they explain it, they use cutting-edge technology to create environments that audiences can experience and interact with through sight, sound and touch.

Kamil Nawratil (MFA 2013) co-founded Volvox Labs while still a student in the MFA Computer Arts program. He enrolled in the program with an eye ▸

KAMIL NAWRATIL (LEFT) AND ZYIA ZHANG AT VOLVOX LABS, CO-FOUNDED BY NAWRATIL IN 2012.

toward studying coding—and also toward finding collaborators for the studio he hoped to start. The focus of his studies changed when he took the 3D for Fine Artists class. "Since then I've been pushing my 3D aesthetic, still involved with programming, but with less emphasis on the code and more on art," says Nawratil.

He found a collaborator in Zyia Zhang (MFA 2013), who now runs the digital fabrication shop at Volvox Labs, making kinetic installations. She studied digital art as an undergraduate and came to the MFA Computer Arts program to focus on video art and fine-art direction. Once she was in the MFA program, she was introduced to digital fabrication and her focus turned to installation.

Nawratil and Zhang ended up worked together in their installation thesis group. "During school when Volvox started picking up, I always tried to involve physical computing and digital fabrication into anything we proposed," Nawratil explains. "Naturally I'd always reach out to Zyia to work with us as she was a killer solder artist and a very hard worker." Zhang says of their relationship, "I admire Kamil's aesthetic perspective and creative ideas. And we both like to use new technology methods to bring audiences an immersive multisensory experience. It's like a huge combination of what we are each good at."

Like the Computer Arts program itself, Volvox Labs focuses on both commercial and artistic work. The balance between the two has been changing. Nawratil explains that when he started the studio, "Most of the time we were told our style and aesthetic is way too artsy, abstract and not fitting the 'brand' image." He decided to develop work for the music festival audience, which was very open to the 3D medium. "Now our clients in a sense need this artsy image to be seen as cool and progressive … allowing us to create visual and installation art as part of their campaigns." And while their clients often have a vision for the work Volvox Labs will do, the studio is given artistic license about 60% to 70% of the time, according to Nawratil. "This lets us create work we dream of, utilizing technology that is new and exciting, all within our particular style." The level of artistic license Volvox Labs gets can vary widely; however, with some clients, often artists and performers, looking for the embodiment of their own vision, and still others coming to the studio to essentially hire developers to bring their projects to life. Nawratil likes this variety: "All of this is extremely exciting as each project brings something new to learn and explore."

What can we can look forward to seeing from Volvox Labs in the near future? Nawratil responds, "We have a few very interesting things in the pipeline. I don't want to jinx anything, but stay put for human-machine communication, robots and lots of laser!"

VOLVOX LABS DESIGNS, PROGRAMS AND FABRICATES INTERACTIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR PUBLIC SPACES.