

# Hyphen Labs

Hyphen Labs is a design and research group led by women of colour, their work experiments with speculative future, technological development, art and stimulating conversation. (Köerner, On bringing the future into the present through radical collaboration, 2019)

## **HYPHEN LABS**

**Art/Design Collective**

October 10, 2017



(MIT Open Documentary  
Lab, 2017)

## The Beginnings and Members

Hyphen labs was founded in 2015 (labs, n.d) by Carmen Aguilar Y Wedge (born April 1986) and Ece Tankal (born May 1988) (Gov.uk, n.d). Ece is a Turkish born architect who studied Interior Architecture and Environmental Design at Bilkent University in Ankara and completed a joint degree in interior design (of commercial spaces) at the Autonomous University of Bar-

celona then received her master's in the institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia for Advanced Architecture, located in Barcelona, in 2014. (IAAC, n.d)

Carmen is a Mexican American with a background in civil engineering who mastered at the institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia studying Architecture and Interaction Design in June 2014. (School for Poetic Computation Logo, 2016)

Here in Barcelona is where Ece and Carmen would meet as they both studied at IAAC (the Institute for Advanced Architecture of Catalonia) and shortly after graduating they would work together in small studios where they realised, they could do this by themselves, and they didn't need to be working for other people (Köerner, On bringing the future into the present through radical collaboration, 2019). So, they decided to open hyphen labs and finished their first project 'prismatic', a kinetic installation inside of a tech company's headquarters.



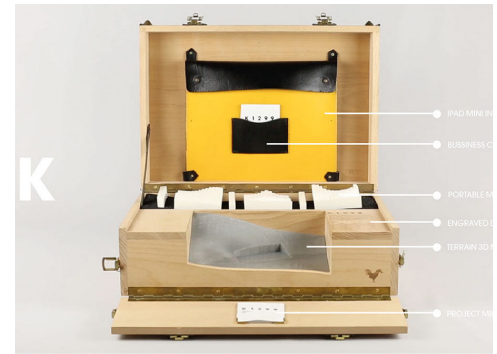
(Web Boom, 2016)

Whilst Carmen moved to New York to attend the school for poetic computation she met Ashley Baccus-Clark their now director of research. She trained in molecular and cellular biology and has worked as a scientist which allowed the group to bridge the gap into taking a more scientific approach to their work, she also helped play a big role in creating the groups acclaimed project NSAF. (Tribeca Film Institute, 2018)

# Hyphen Labs Projects

## *Bad Box (2015)*

Their first project as a group where they create a tool for architects, this tool would help visualize ideas, in real time, for clients. They integrated traditional craft, digital tools and emerging technologies. (hyphen labs, n.d)



(hyphen labs, n.d)

## *Prismatic (2016)*

This project was set up in New York above The High Line, this LED display featured 66 prisms run on a brushless motor allowing people going by to enjoy the light show. (design boom, 2016)

## *Painkillers (2018)*

In this project they worked in collaboration with The National Safety Council and agency Energy BBDO. The installation called Prescribed to Death is a memorial made up of thousands of pills that are carved with human faces, representing people who died from opioid addiction. This was to highlight the opioid crisis in the US. (mssngpeces, 2018)



(hyphen labs, n.d)

## *Anxious Ocean and the Moon Bathers (2019)*

This installation was open from March 22nd to May 5th, 2019, it was exhibited at Somerset House in London for Earth Day Season 2019. The immersive audio-visual installation shows a post human future where you're transported into an underwater ecosphere with the ocean is 'infused with human consciousness'. This was to raise awareness to climate changes long term effects. (Somerset House, 2019)

## *PushMi Pull Yu (2020)*

Open from September 12th to November 22nd 2020 at Schering Stiftung in Berlin, this immersive installation allowed visitors to interact with robots with balloons attached and watch how they interact and move this was to show the divide between free will and determinism with the robots lack of control. (Schering Stiftung, 2020)

## *Insidious rising (2022)*

In 2022 they made this interactive digital art experience for UNFCCC(United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) where they translate climate change data into a more storytelling, felt experience to provoke awareness for the risks of climate change. (Brooks, 2022)



(Experiments with Google, 2022)

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**ARGU-MENT**





In conversation with

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(MIT Open Documentary  
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Hyphen labs is a group run by women of colour in a variety of fields, these fields spanning from design, architecture, technology and engineering (MIT Open Documentary Lab, 2017). In their work they display the concern of lack of representation. Hyphen labs itself is a form of representation, with the collection of them being women of colour from all around the world all in separate fields. The very existence of Hyphen Labs challenges the demographic of the tech and design industries, with it predominately being run by white males. In the

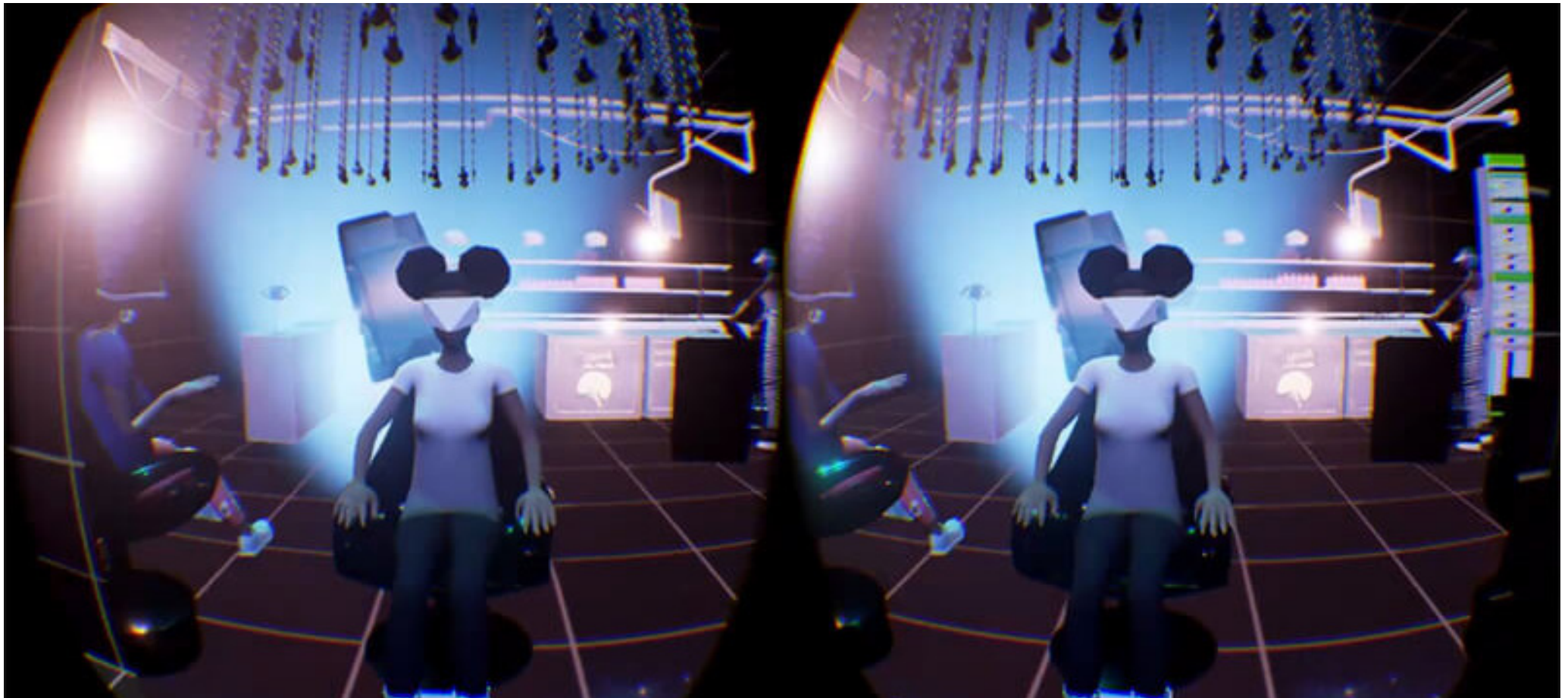
Founding members Ece Tankal (left) and Carmen Aguilar y Wedge (right) (hyphen labs, n.d)

tech industry it is reported that only 19% of UK tech workers are women and only 5% of the leadership positions in the tech industry is held by women (Gov.UK, 2023).

Their most known project NSAF (Neuro Speculative Afro Feminism) directly confronts how women of colour are excluded from technological futures (docu-base, n.d), often with the representation leaning the design towards the perspective of white western males. (NAMA, Black Space: imagining race in science fiction film, 2008) In Sci Fi film, the setting often lands in a white suburban neighborhood (Redmond,

2006) where the development of white males and their power is clear, with the lead scientist often is a white male. '96.3% of scientists depicted in films are white and 82% are male' (SciComm Collective, 2020).

Image showing perspective from within NSAF VR (Kavanagh, 2017)





NSAF produce speculative futures that center afro women instead, creating the experience inside a hair salon. (hyphen labs, n.d) These speculative designs create space for identity rarely represented in mainstream narratives of innovation or progression. This was very powerful as at the time 2017 as these VR spaces were new and most excluded nonwhite bodies and women experiences, this meant it worked both as artwork and social commentary demonstrating the systemic barriers that black women face in both everyday life and emerging technologies with the lack of representation. “Traditional visions of the future from the past rarely include people of color ... Marginalized people, especially Black people, need and deserve to speculate.” (Klassen, 2022). This is shown throughout design, art and film where they often centre

the view of the media around white western perspective. ‘Before Black Panther, speculative fiction and science fiction had not drawn me in. In Black Panther, I, like millions of other people of the African diaspora, could finally see myself.’ (Ann-Noel, 2022) This quote from black experience in design shows how many people of African descent may struggle to be drawn into many futuristic media. In films such as Back to the Future there are underlying tones with the portrayal of a black mayor leading a city into economic and moral

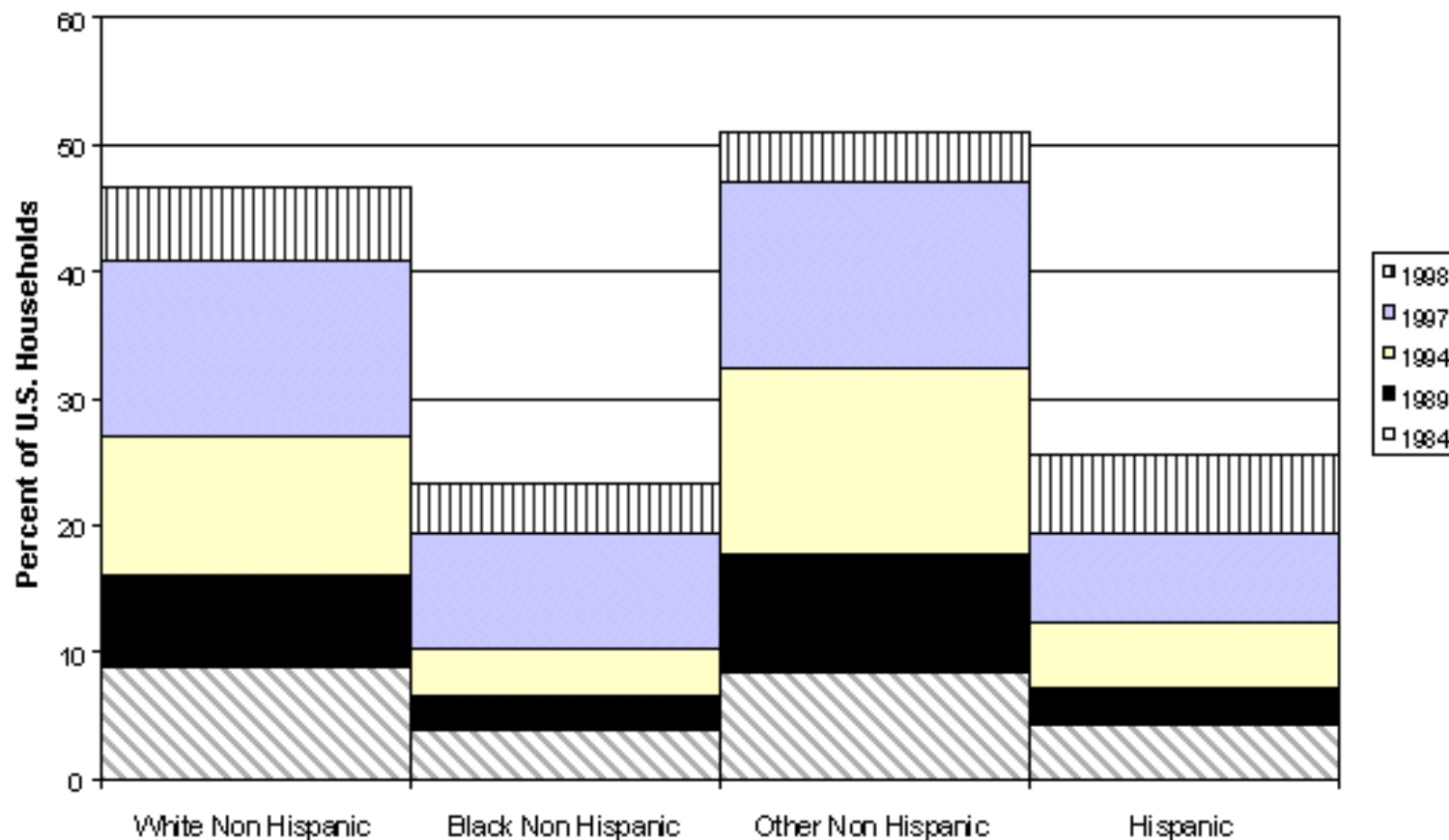
destruction suggesting to not trust black leadership. (NAMA, Black Space: imagining race in science fiction film, 2008)

Wakanda in black panther representing an African speculative future. (Theology, 2019)



The NSAF project also demonstrates how future design should be inclusive to all genders and race with their functionality. 'You interact with products designed with real-world strife in mind, including earrings fit to record police interactions, a visor that reflects microaggressions back at the assailant.' (Weber, 2018) In 2020 '71% of Black Americans said they have experienced some form of racial discrimination or police mistreatment in their lifetime.' (KFF,

2020)These are issues that are NEVER brought up when art or media show an idealistic future. They are creating a future where technological breakthroughs aren't just for rich, white areas, but instead for communities excluded from past and current benefits. In 1997 Computer ownership was predominately used by white people with ownership of, 'White 40.8%, Black 19.3%'. (ntia.gov, n.d)



Graph displaying the ownership of computers in America through the years. (ntia.gov, n.d).



In hyphen labs projects where they portray a futuristic vision, they believe it should be designed to feature mental and emotional well-being, whether that be keeping someone safe or keeping people included in a world they never have been before (Carmen Aguilar, 2019). Whereas is most stereotypical futuristic portrayals they focus on weapons or infrastructure, hyphen labs suggest futures should focus on

healing and supporting communities especially for communities who have experiences generational trauma. In other projects they also show their interest in provoking thoughts on climate change and spreading awareness.

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