

FRIEDMAN BENDA
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designboom

Ekene Ijeoma on drawing and sculpting with data for Friedman Benda's 'Design in Dialogue'

By Nina Azzarello
August 25, 2020



on april 1, 2020, new york gallery [friedman benda](#) initiated a series of online interviews aimed at connecting individuals across the world with leading voices in the creative field. [design in dialogue](#) is a conversational program hosted alternately by curator and historian [glenn adamson](#) and designer [stephen burks](#) that engages with designers, makers, critics, and curators as they reflect on their careers and creative processes. against the backdrop of [COVID-19](#) and global lockdowns, the conversations are held virtually on zoom for 1 hour for anyone in the world to tune in to, and include a participatory Q&A with the audience in attendance. friedman benda has since presented more than 40 episodes, and will continue with a lineup of future guests, each offering unparalleled insight into the sensibilities, musings, and memories of today's creative protagonists. **see our recent feature of [daniel arsham's discussion on the dissolution of architecture and time](#), and [bijoy jain speaking about scale, skill, time, and craft](#).**

on august 21, [design in dialogue](#) welcomed brooklyn and boston-based artist [ekene ijeoma](#), whose creative practice lies at the intersection of life experience, data study, performance, and social efficacy. through multiple fields of research, ijeoma creates work ranging

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from apps and websites, to music performances and interactive installations by translating data into multimedia using computational design and conceptual art strategies. ekene recently became an assistant professor at MIT's media lab and directs the [poetic justice research group](#), a platform for critical thinkers and makers exploring new forms of justice through art. in his conversation with stephen burks, ijeoma elaborated on his interest in developing new ways of seeing, and understanding social issues, through data.

watch the full video interview at the top of the page and stay tuned as designboom continues to share *design in dialogue* features. see all past episodes — and RSVP for upcoming ones — [here](#).

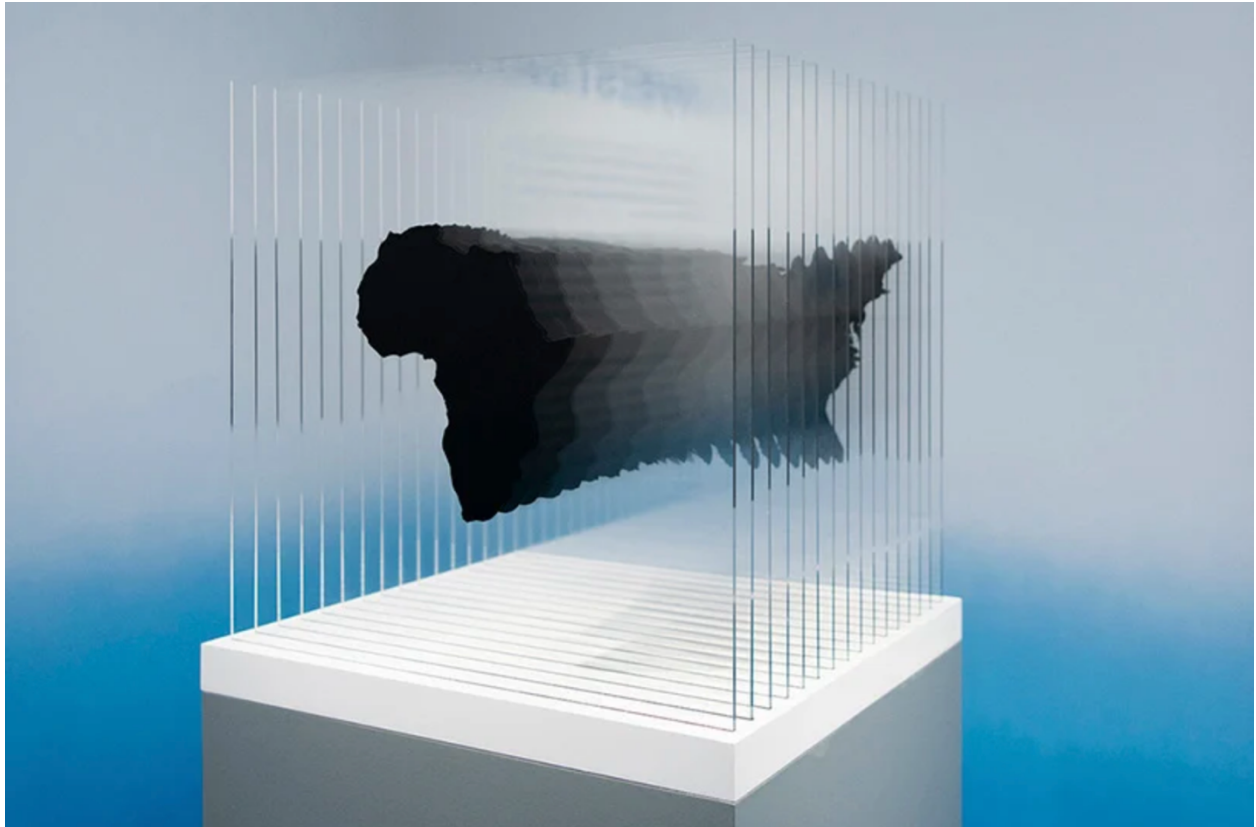


'wage islands' is an installation that highlights new york city's salary disparity. read more on designboom [here](#)

how does an artist end up working with data? ijeoma described a transitional period in his youth that led to his interest in data as a creative tool, and eventually its use as an artistic medium. *"in high school, I was in honors art courses. I had also taken a few computer science courses, but failed them. then in college, I studied information technology, because being a first generation nigerian-american, my parents thought it would be better for me to go into technology, rather than the arts. when I was learning how to code different sorts of applications, I was really going back to seeing how I could draw with code. in that time, I was just making a lot of figurative work, so I was drawing the things I could see. I think data interested me because it's all the things you can't see. it's drawing with material that's based on people's experiences — not just individual experiences, but collective experiences. I saw data as a way to draw with that as a material. a lot*

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of my work is not 2-dimensional, so then it became drawing with data, sculpting with data, composing with data...'



'pan-african AIDS' explores the hypervisibility of the HIV/aids epidemic in africa and the hidden one in black america

ijeoma also went on to discuss one of his most significant data-driven works, 'the refugee project' — 'a literal representation of refugee migration from 1975 to now'. the artist spoke about data's capacity for communicating information on a more expansive scale than other artistic mediums, which may otherwise emphasize a specific person or place. *'I think this was one of the first representations that showed the breadth and depth of the refugee crisis,'* he says about the project. *'I think back to one of the first images that represented the crisis, which came out the year I was born — [the afghan girl](#) [photographed by steve mccurry]. when these crises are represented just in photographs, there's a way of only being able to see those few countries that are photographed, or the few individuals that are photographed, and not being able to understand the scale of the issue. that's something you can do with data. I was trying to see the millions of other refugees outside of the frame of that photograph.'*



'the refugee project' is a narrative, temporal map and responsive interface of refugee migrations since 1975. read more on designboom [here](#)

finally, burks highlighted the unique space in the art world that ijeoma has carved out in working with data to highlight social issues. he questioned ijeoma on where this sense of consciousness might have been drawn from. *'maybe it just comes from the empathy that's required to survive as a first generation american,' ijeoma considered. 'it's always about trying to understand how people perceive you, and how we can perceive the world in a way which includes me, and other people that look like me. I think it was also a resistance to what I'd been doing throughout most of my career — telling other people's stories, telling the stories of brands — many of whom didn't relate to my story — and not finding a platform or medium to do that in, or always having to do it in the same medium. what I'm doing with [poetic justice \[at MIT media lab\]](#) is developing the language to be able to talk about these things across multiple disciplines and mediums, and really trying to develop a new language around these issues, so that we can begin to understand something new about them.'*



the project forms a learning experience intended to increase awareness about the plight of millions of people who have had to flee their homes — explore the website [here](#)



'monuments for a new era' reimagines a former robert e. lee monument in new orleans as a living monument

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The Star Spangled Banner
arr. Kris Bowers

♩ = 100

Piano

O say can you by light proud - we

twi - light's last ing Whose broad stripes and bright stars per - il -

Am E Am D7 G C C/G

C/E C Am E7 Am D

C C/G G C/E C C

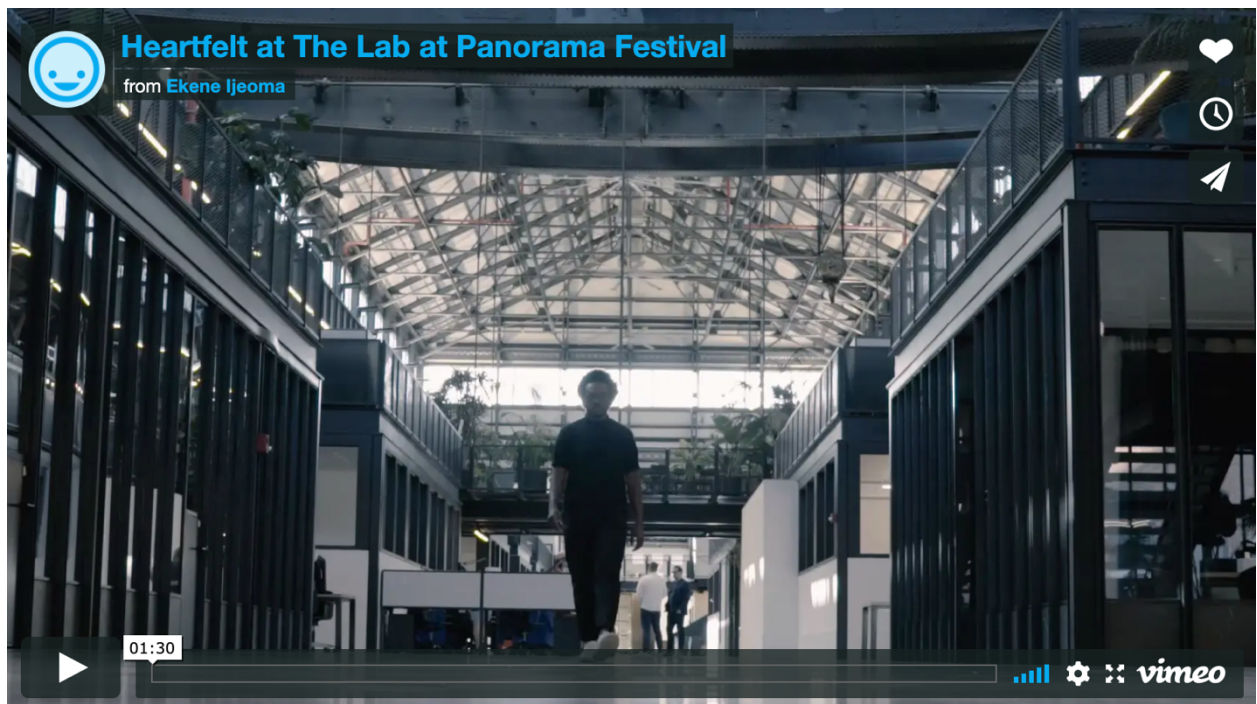
'deconstructed anthems' is an ongoing series of music performances and sound-reactive light installations in which a self-playing piano and/or music ensemble deconstruct the star-spangled banner, repeating it multiple times, removing notes at the rate of mass incarceration, and ending in silence — see video below



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'heartfelt' is an interactive light installation which prompts participants to use their bodies as conductors to close the circuits between lights — see a behind-the-scenes video below



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portrait of ekene ijeoma | image courtesy of friedman benda

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