

# METAL

[Fashion | Beauty](#)

[Literature | Mags](#)

[Travel | Hotspots | Events](#)

[ARCHIVE](#) | [PODCAST](#) | [ACERO](#)

[Art | Photography](#)

[Design | Activism](#)

[Film | Music](#)



F I O N A R A B Y

O N F O R E C A S T M E N T O R S H I P S  
A N D T H E P O W E R O F D E S I G N

At the beginning of August, Forecast and Radialsystem invited their audience to experience eighteen multidisciplinary projects by a wide array of artists, musicians, performers, and designers. We told you about it here, and since then, we've been following them closely to know more about this initiative

that fosters talent and promotes interdisciplinary artistic connections. As part of its programme, Forecast is now entering the mentoring phase, where different experts choose one project each to keep guiding its growth and evolution. One of these mentors is designer Fiona Raby, with whom we have the honour of speaking today.

The British designer, partner of the New York-based design studio Dunne & Raby and whose practice is centred on Critical Design, which applies a critical theory approach to design, decided to accept the invitation of Freo Majer, Artistic Director of Forecast, after having said no to becoming a mentor on previous occasions. So what made her change her mind? “This time, Forecast jumped out to me as a unique opportunity to explore performative and somatic languages and forms I was unfamiliar with. It was something that we kept getting glimpses of and were curious about,” she explains.

As a mentor, she’s worked closely with three different mentees whose projects explore “ways around climate, ecology, and the non-human, but they are coming from very different perspectives, with very different expertise,” Fiona explains. And from now until March of 2025, she’ll be centring her attention on Johanna Seelmann’s *De agri cultura* initiative, which explores possible transformations within the farming industry.





**Fiona, thank you for taking the time to speak with us. How are you and where do you answer us from?**

I'm back in New York after a vibrant and stimulating summer.

**You're one of the mentors for the 9th edition of Forecast, a platform dedicated to facilitating, mentoring, and promoting trailblazing creative practices. How did you get the proposal? Did you accept immediately?**

Freo first approached me in 2017, but Tony and I were very unsettled creatively at that time. However, this year the moment was much better aligned; we were in

the middle of evolving many new thoughts and insights bubbling up after a three-month residency at IASPIS in Stockholm. And from co-teaching with Post-Humanities scholar Dominic Pettman. This time, Forecast jumped out to me as a unique opportunity to explore performative and somatic languages and forms I was unfamiliar with. It was something that we kept getting glimpses of and were curious about.

Not that as designers we would ever become performers, but there were elements of storytelling, methods and processes that perhaps in design we were missing out on. Additionally, since mentorship was something familiar to me, after thirty years of teaching in art school, the opportunity to work outside the academy with very accomplished and skilful mid-career practitioners is much rarer, particularly around design. It's quite a juggle for design practitioners to give time to do this kind of research and experimentation.

**“Mentors must be curious, flexible, warmhearted, patient, and above all generous.” said Freo Maier.**

**Artistic Director of Forecast, the last time we spoke with him. Could you tell us more about the role you play and how it is going?**

It has been a pure joy to work with three very accomplished and inspirational practitioners, they are all these things you say here! I chose them very deliberately as their projects overlapped for me in very interesting ways around climate, ecology, and the non-human, but they are coming from very different perspectives, with very different expertise. As a mentor, this has been magical.

**Could you tell us a bit more about the process?**

The first two and half months were far too short but tremendous. I wish there was more time for them all to exchange with each other, but in those first months, they had to go deeper into their research and work out what to focus on. And then, how to set these ideas within the very specific context of Forecast, a live arts event in a performative format. It is not a context my mentees are so familiar with—although **Mali Weil is coming from film/performance.**

**Recently, they have been working with smaller groups and with a more intimate participatory approach. The format has been quite a challenge for the group, and what they presented in the July Forum was a tiny taster of their full body of research work. I think we did contribute something a little different to the event.**





**We were there, it was amazing! But for those who weren't, could you give us some insight?**

Justin Bean opened our session with an announcement through the tannoy for the audience to rejoin a formal International Global Climate Conference as active delegates, using a satire of refrigerated deserts as provocative proposals; Baked Alaska, Pink Brain Blancmange, and a Very Wobbly Melting Green Jelly. They were asked to vote to ban the practice of extreme technological excesses, such as fake snow production for skiing, human stem cells to replace cattle farming, and lush golf courses in hot climates. But as with the Montreal Protocol in the 1970s repairing the ozone would require agreement from all delegates, not so easily achievable.

Johanna Seelemann immersed the audience, diving deep below the ground into healthy soil, filmed with lens and sensitive sound recordings that made visible

microscopic and microbial creatures, previously unrecognised as 'farmers' and undervalued, but now re-established as essential and vital contributors, including a series of alternative design proposals that reimagined very different soil communities with different values, where gentle sound environments and careful mindful practices could be implemented with different tools.

Ending with Mali Weil, representing the Sun Eaters and the First Planetary Metabolic Convention, through new laws which were read out as a public agreement after starting off a metabolic process in the audience's stomachs with a small Kombucha toast. The collection of bacteria from the cheek of a lawyer becomes a biochemical clock marking the time of the legal proceedings, which ended with the audience signing the agreement by collectively eating seeds

attached to the legal document.

**What are you enjoying the most about this experience?**

I have enjoyed enormously the differences in approach and expertise between the three mentees. In an ideal world, all three would continue on further, and the combination of their different ideas, the different layers, the politics, the materiality, the sensuality, satire, and the playful use of language, the immersive fiction, the world building—all contribute to a very holistic approach for an audience to experience and explore.

I also enjoyed immensely seeing performer mentees, the vocal artists, in dance and in visual media also explore these themes—worlds that can't breathe and the distress of non-humans in a suffocating human world. Sounds, movements, atmosphere... Very visceral experiences. I loved the layering of this theme through multiple expressions. I was very inspired by the accumulation, the multiplicity, and the richness of experiences.

**Teaching is something you know very well. You're a University Professor of Design and Social Inquiry, and a Fellow of the Graduate Institute for Design Ethnography and Social Thought at The New School in New York. You have been collaborating with universities and schools for over two decades. What pillars is your educational method built upon?**

All our activities come under the Designed Realities Studio; our teaching and research are intrinsically linked and we have a lot of freedom to experiment with classes and subject matter. Tony and I are always interested in things at the very edges of understanding. Quantum science and the paradoxes of non-human worlds are two of our current curiosities. We mainly work across the university and across disciplines.

Our studio class sits alongside regular classes and predominant narratives. We always ask the students to bring some very small things from their larger projects. Something they are curious about and feel they don't have time to explore in the regular class. Something to experiment with that sits at the edge of their practice, but not disconnected, to think intuitively and push away the usual logic, at least for a moment. Design is mostly about problem-solving, so it's very hard to break away from rational thinking and what is perceived to be 'realistic', these edges can be very rigid. So a lot of our practice and teaching is about loosening these edges. We love Ursula K. Le Guin's term "realists of a larger reality."

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**Could you tell us more about your way of teaching and how you manage to connect with students?**

On a practical level, it's a very collective space of exchange; different insights and expertise from a roundtable group contribute to a project. The students gain multiple perspectives, methods, and knowledge from persistent and iterative processes, which enables a very nuanced level of engagement. Tony and I just make sure everyone is pushing at something unknowable, a little outside of current reach. Propositional. A synthetic response. The only rule we have is 'show not tell', rather than talk about the experiment, do the experiment, and show the group

what happened.

We use an iterative process which provides an opportunity to build on something incrementally, to take risks, or to take the same thing and see it from very different perspectives—providing multiple attempts at a materialisation. One of the criteria which emerges from the group is engagement, which can be quite tough, but very motivating since the group bonds closely. Critique is productive and supportive driven by a collective curiosity to genuinely see what might come out of the experiment.

**You're also a partner in the design studio Dunne & Raby, whose work has been exhibited at the MoMA in New York, the Pompidou in Paris, and the Design Museum in London, among many others. The studio's philosophy is to use design as a medium to stimulate discussion and debate among designers. Tell us more about the methodology you follow.**

We have always been interested in emerging technologies; it started in the '90s with digital technologies, moved into biotechnologies and synthetic biology, and now post-Covid it has moved into the edges of reality, the unknown, the impossible, the paradoxical. We have moved towards a more philosophical and poetic practice. Some say we are artists whose subject is design, but we are both trained in design, so of course we are designers. A current obsession is how ideas in theory, from science or from literature, almost impossible things in material terms become material. And how these ideas and objects might sit in everyday worlds alongside tables, vases, products, and other tools.

We have just written a new book, *Not Here, Not Now: Speculative Thought, The Impossible and the Design Imagination*, which will be published by MIT Press in Spring 2025, building on our previous book, going deeper into a few ideas that we just touched on...

“Rather than more futures, or end points extrapolated



rather than more images, or end points extrapolated from a faulty present, new starting points are needed. Spaces to momentarily step out of existing realities, a ‘not here, not now,’ to imagine different ways of being in the world, made tangible through the design of everyday things. Not as an escape, not as a vision of how things will or should be, but to shake off old habits, patterns, and mindsets in preparation for as yet unknown realities.” As for methods, I’m not sure we have any, it’s mostly ad hoc curiosity-driven with endless iteration.

**When we spoke with Freo in March of this year, he told us that Forecast 9 would focus their interest in practices that pursue radically free experimentation and play as a working principle, and they wanted to take this even further. What stage is the edition in? And what is next?**

I am reporting just after the Forum event in August, and I have started an individual conversation with Johanna Seelemann. She is a very accomplished designer producing very beautiful and thoughtful work. A designer who loves to explore materials both sensitively and conceptually. She is also a practitioner with her own design studio working with clients. It’s very hard for designers outside of academia to squeeze in any substantial non-essential experiments, but she teaches and runs workshops with early practitioners, which enables her to progress her ideas intellectually and conceptually. So of course, with this opportunity from Forecast, we are discussing which aspects Johanna can explore to do something she would not ordinarily be able to do outside her normal practice.

The other interest we might look at, particularly as Johanna is so skilled and sensitive to material language and form, is to challenge the often romantic, wholesome ‘natural’ material languages that go alongside more than human discourses, addressing some of the contradictions and disjunctions while

acknowledging a prevailing technological and synthetic world alongside. It's a paradoxical space, which makes for a fertile territory for invention and experiment, rather than solutions.





Words  
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R E L A T E D   C O N T E N T S



Art Septiembre 23, 2024

### Dust to Dust Tender Transience of Life

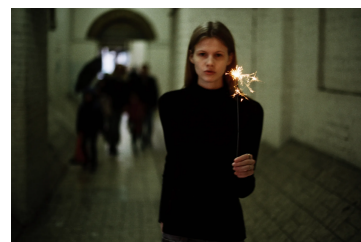
This three-person exhibition featuring Magdalena Abakanowicz, Phoebe Cummings, and Robert Mapplethorpe explores the cycles of life through the lens of nature's inherent temporality.



Art Septiembre 23, 2024

### Pío Abad Communal Art Making and Shared Histories

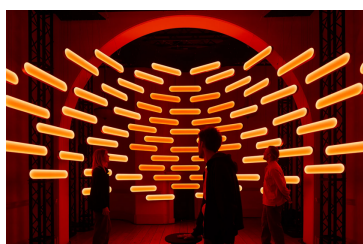
Turner-nominated exhibition "To Those Sitting in Darkness" is a tender call to explore shared narratives. Opening at Tate Britain this Wednesday.



Art Septiembre 18, 2024

### The Burrow London Show Will You Forget?

After its debut collection in Glasgow earlier this year, The Burrow brings its second collection, "Memory," to London—an unforgettable display of thought from Sept 19th to 21st.



Design Septiembre 16, 2024

### London Design Festival 2024 Our Top 10 Picks

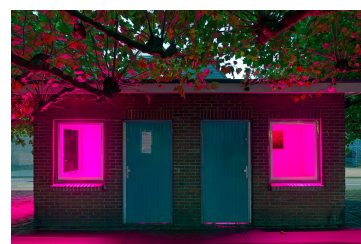
From immersive installations playing with light and soundscapes to HAY's open showroom, to traditional Japanese craftsmanship and curious objects from around the globe, here's what you can't miss.



Art Septiembre 12, 2024

### Tempio Festival 2024 Berlin meets Milan

The inaugural edition of Tempio Festival in Berlin was a music, arts, and cultural exchange that took the vision of the project born in Milan to the next level.



Art Septiembre 11, 2024

### Fluxus Corporum Moving Bodies

As territories shift, the movement of bodies create a hybrid sense of 'home'. Inspired by Bourriaud's concept of 'alter-modernity', this exhibition explores how identities are continually reshaped.

M O R E   C O N T E N T S