Emergent Digital Practices Student Finds Inspiration in Illness
By Lucy Constantino

In April 2009, Denver native Sarah Richter woke up one morning and her world was turned upside down. After experiencing bouts of severe vertigo, triple vision and fatigue for months, doctors diagnosed Richter with Multiple Sclerosis (MS).

“Getting MS was a catalyst,” said Richter, a graduate student in the emergent digital practices (EDP) program, which brings together art, design, media, culture and technology studies in a hands-on collaborative environment.

“The experience of seeing and perceiving the world so differently drastically changed my sensory awareness. It offered me insights into the possibilities and limitations of our senses, and provided me with an opportunity to examine my life and purpose in a more meaningful way.”

Prior to her MS diagnosis, Richter was working in commercial arts. While the job proved to be interesting, Richter felt that she wasn’t living an authentic life that she so craved. That’s when her friend, a mentor and DU alumnus, suggested the EDP program at DU. After sitting in on a class taught by Professor Laleh Mehran, Richter knew she had found her calling.

“I was truly amazed by the curriculum and the advanced, cutting-edge work the students were creating,” she said. “I felt so inspired, and beyond that, I wanted so much to be a part of this program. Since then, my experience at DU has been transformative.”

Richter soon began to explore herself as a person with a debilitating illness, as well as an artist. Several of the mediums she incorporates into her works include sound, video, performance and interactivity. Through these mediums, she hopes for audiences to better understand MS through experience rather than explanation.

“This process often involves incorporating technology in a way that’s entirely new for me,” she said. “The unknown aspects and discovery are incredibly exciting, challenging and invigorating to explore.”

Richter was invited to exhibit her work earlier this year at the Art Gallery on the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus—just steps away from her MS treatment team at the Rocky Mountain MS Center. Sensory Paradox: An Artist’s Experience with Multiple Sclerosis focused on describing the sensations and feelings associated from her own experiences with MS, such as vertigo, fatigue, and changes in vision and hearing.
“My hope in creating this work was to facilitate a dialogue of connection and understanding in relating to the experiences of those living with MS,” said Richter.

Works in the exhibit included Fatigue, comparing exhaustion to moving underwater; Audible Departures, exploring ranges of auditory symptoms; and Re-Connected, allowing audiences to photograph a physical feature that represents loss and become a part of a body mosaic.

“In my experience of living with Multiple Sclerosis, I’ve found it to be a fluid and dynamic process,” she said. “Sometimes I detest the limitations of MS, but more often, I can’t imagine who I’d be today without it.”

Richter plans to graduate from the program in spring 2017, with aspirations of continuing to grow as a professional artist, creating fine art installations and teaching collegiate courses.

“Seeing the world differently has been inspiring, overcoming obstacles has been liberating, and developing a deeper understanding of myself has been transformative. Experiencing MS symptoms was a painful process, but it was incredibly beautiful, too,” she said.