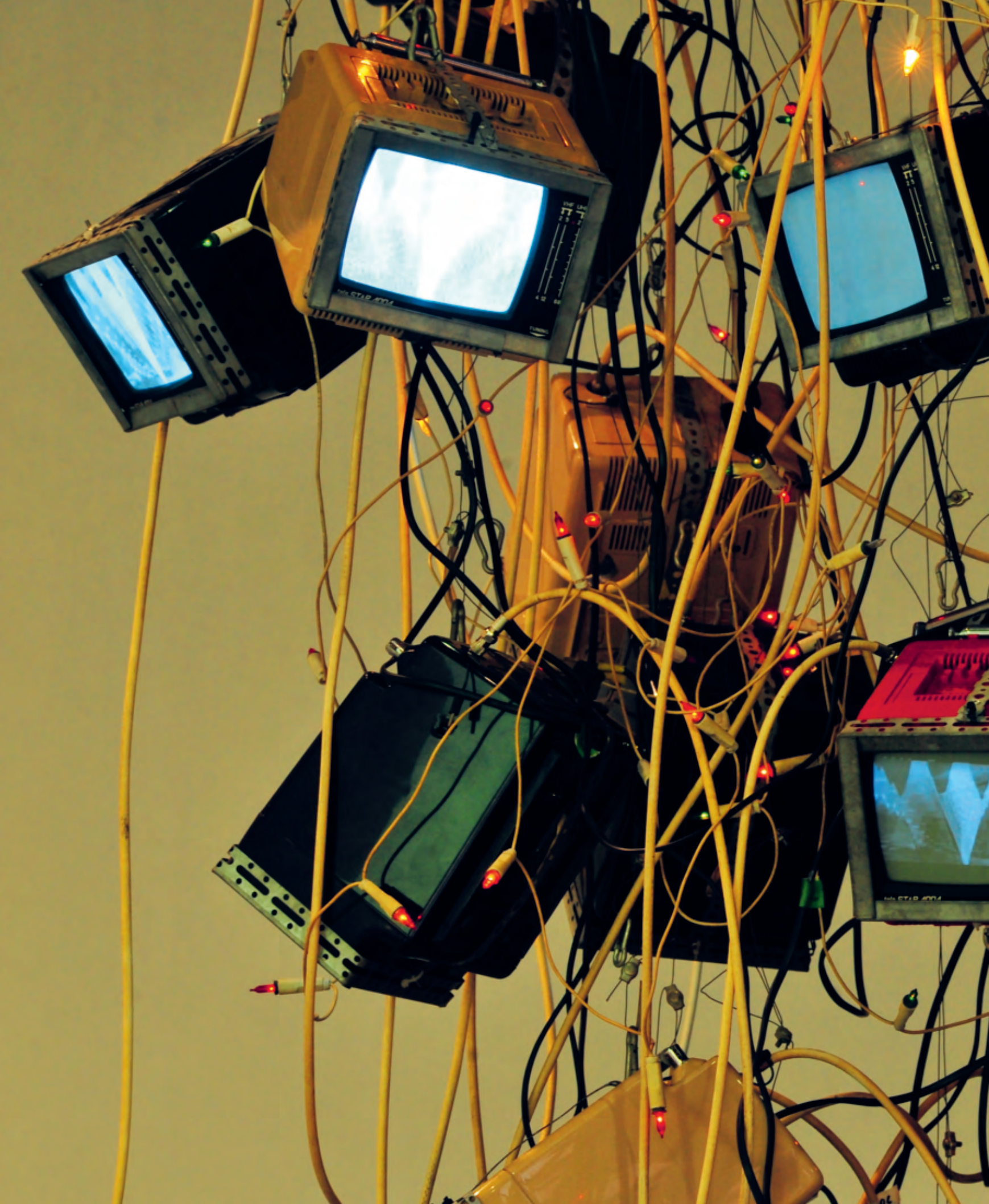


MÉMOIRES\_VIVES

FROM NAM JUNE PAIK TO SLIDERS\_LAB

# MÉMOIRES\_VIVES









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# MÉMOIRES VIVES – LIVING MEMORIES

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Video art, which first appeared in the 1960s, was a contemporary of television whose commercial aspect, aesthetic purpose and method of dissemination, however, it did not share. The idea of the pioneers of video art – Nam June Paik, Steina and Woody Vasulka, Volf Vostell, and, in France, Jean-Christophe Averty – was to break down the languages of art and the classical modes of representation through the use of the new televisual medium. Thus Paik, in 1963, at the exhibition 'Music/Electronic Television' at the Galerie Parnass of Rolf Jährling in Wuppertal, showed an installation consisting of thirteen television sets disrupted by frequency generators and whose screens displayed striped and striated images. The production of abstract images independent of the mass medium of television thus became the hallmark of this early phase of video art, during which artists would endeavour to explore the possibilities offered by the 'immaterial' nature of the electronic signal.

Anyone familiar with contemporary art already knows what I have just described in a few lines. However, what I wanted to highlight here was the importance of, at the beginning of this adventure called video art, a few key terms: power, mass media, television, dissemination, signal, technique. These would, in fact, occupy the focus of a large part of the artists' activities and open up new horizons in which some saw the birth of a whole new *épistémè*.

This idea of a world in transformation which, from the 1960s on, would shift into another era of knowledge is particularly interesting here, because it intersects with reflections heard in the early 1990s when the computer first became 'personal', that is, accessible to all. With the advent of 'automatic calculators' in the home, in anticipation of the changes to come, people referred to the era as a new Renaissance, subject to an upheaval such as humankind had not experienced since the invention of printing in the 15th century.

We therefore would like to show in this exhibition that these two moments, that of the 1960s and that of the 1990s, are linked by secret paths. On this journey

of discovery, we will follow three tracks: first, that of the devices, their use and their creation by the artists as well as the language that animates them; second, the track of memory and, consequently, of the archive; and third, the track of the multiplicity of screens as the construction of new mental universes.

#### THE DEVICES, THE LANGUAGES

-----  
Video art initially sought to shape existing devices – television, the cathode ray tube, the tape recorder, the Portapak camera [after 1967] – either by integrating them into installations, or by dismantling their mechanisms so as to propose reinterpretations via the invention of new devices created by the artists with the assistance of engineers.

At the birth of this art, Nam June Paik made the founding gesture of interrogating the materiality of the television-object and turning it into an instrument that played with the physicality of the electronic image: the modulation of the image so that it is reduced to a simple horizontal or vertical line; an image that varies in real time depending on the pitch of the sound; a pedal that, when activated, causes the image to flash.

From the end of the 1960s the physicality of the electronic image – a form of time-energy – was also questioned by the Vasulkas. In this regard, they talked of building and rebuilding space in time. With the video image freed from the frame of the cinematographic image, it could then unfold in space according to various physical phenomena: the echo [feedback, the Larsen effect], impulse [the stroboscopic effect], scanning, shift, torsion, switching, keying.

Following the model of music which saw the development of synthesizers for the manipulation of sounds, video artists created many devices. These allowed them to control the image accurately, to repeat effects, to explore modification phenomena more deeply, and to address, too, the question of the relief of the electronic image that appears on the surface of the 2D screens. The transformations of the signal were based on

many devices: the colourizer, the keyer, the multiple keyer, the Putney synthesizer, the H.D. Variable Clock, the dual colorizer, the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor, the digital memory processor, oscillator drift, flip-flop switcher ...

From 1978 on, the transition to digital technology brought to the fore the question of languages. The analogue technology that operates by reproducing the signal so it can be recorded in another medium – for example magnetic tapes in the case of audiovisual cassettes – was gradually replaced by a language based on '0' and '1'. Woody Vasulka's *Syntax of Binary Images* was the first known attempt to test this new language as he sought to understand its effects on the reading and construction of images.

This 'pseudo-didactic' work relating to the languages of art was reactivated some forty years later by the collective of artists SLIDERS\_lab who, in collaboration with Woody Vasulka, started by taking the original work as an open field of activity able to generate new reflexive processes using today's devices: the computer, the 3D printer, the Kinect sensor, and so on.

This dive into art history chimes well with a time when increasing numbers of artists – wild scholars one and all – are starting to reread and sometimes redo earlier experiments and incorporate them into their work. This is the case of Joost Rekvelde who, with his installation #67 [2018], 'replays' *Reminiscence*, a video made in 1974 by Steina and Woody Vasulka, going to the trouble of remanufacturing a modern Rutt/Etra Scan Processor for the occasion, and still using analogue technology.

#### MEMORY AND ARCHIVE

One way to address this issue is to turn to the pair *anamnesis* – that is, recollection – and *hypomnesis* – that is, all the internal and external techniques used to support memory. The first term emphasizes the idea that the recording of information is useless if there is no system in place to reproduce, to draw out, and refresh memories, that is to say, our personal archive. In this model,

widely disseminated since Aristotle, the memories of empirical origin constitute a dead memory, which humans can voluntarily recall by the action of the living memory, which is the faculty of anamnesis. Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* [2002] can be seen as, among other things, a staging of this idea of reminiscence, even if it were at level zero. In this well-known installation, a stone Buddha contemplates his image, which is transmitted in real time on a TV set whose screen is a mirror that reflects, opposes, but also opens a dimension in depth, so that the cathodic image appears to be a trace of what the sculpture is thinking, absorbed in its own thoughts.

The second term of the pair, *hypomnesis*, links memory to technique, making it dependent on the recording tools available to us at a given time. It raises the question of the technicality of the trace – a book is not a videotape which is not a hard drive – and hence of access to those traces.

In the case of digital technology, for example, what would be the use of billions of documents stored on computers and other servers on the planet if there were no interface to reproduce them on our screens? The advent of digital technology requires a reflection of new 'intellectual technologies', new knowledge systems that rely on the widespread storage of traces and computerized access to them.

In our era there is no shortage of archives. In the 21st century, a 'archivology' is required, to use Derrida's term – in other words, a science of the archive, where 'archiving is a performative act, an active, productive interpretation'.<sup>1</sup> Starting from texts, images, videos, sounds, from these potential narrative spaces, it is necessary to invent an archival organology, new mnemonic instruments that allow us to rethink 'the relations between physiological organs, technical bodies and social organizations'.<sup>2</sup>

This is the whole meaning of a work like *VIM* [*Vasulka interactive Multimedia*], which has been in development since 2014 by SLIDERS\_lab and which proposes a new type of open interactive instrument to

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive*, Paris, Galilée, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *De la misère symbolique 2. La catastrophe du sensible*, Paris, Galilée, 2004, pp. 29, 99.

<sup>3</sup> The title of Woody Vasulka's work also pays tribute to Frances A. Yates's *The Art of Memory*, Chicago IL., University of Chicago Press, 1966.

navigate through the memory of the artists Steina and Woody Vasulka. In the same way, *BIG CRUNCH\_Marienbad* by the artists Maria Bathélemy and René Sultra is a flexible and reconfigurable information medium, a woven fabric across which pass the optical fibres inserted into the material of *Last Year at Marienbad*, a film folded in on itself, directed by Alain Resnais in 1961. This 11-m-long, 1.5-m-wide screen gives shape to the idea developed in Woody Vasulka's film *Art of Memory* [1984], which offers architectures of modular images set in natural landscapes into which are inscribed images of the major conflicts of the 20th century.

The title of Vasulka's film *Art of Memory* refers precisely to the memory palaces which, until the Middle Ages, played an essential role in the mechanism of recollection, by facilitating journeys along the left traces, via the construction of principles of classification in monuments intended to recover 'souvenir pictures'. The *Anarchive* collection [1999-2018] directed by Anne-Marie Duguet is an extension of this tradition. The authors of each issue, all recognized artists on the international scene, offer navigations through their work, always following singular paths through interfaces that organize and shape their thinking in virtual space.

#### MULTIPLE SCREENS

The matrix layout of monitors is one of the responses of artists to the omnipotence of the film frame. The combination of monitors, and sometimes even large numbers of them, thus allows a combinatory game with the modalities of the appearance of images in multiple frames. The effect thus created reinforces the hypnotic and compulsive processes of the appearance and disappearance of images, and drags the bodies of the spectators into innovative immersive experiences, but also the bodies of the artists in disturbing choreographies where they hybridize into complex interactive man-machine devices.

The multiplication of video frames also corresponds to what artists' experi-

ence in their workshops. In their daily lives, they look at an image on several screens. They were the first to realize, at the beginning of the 1970s, that the image is no longer alone, but that it is immediately included in a network that obviously summons memory, but also all the images produced on Earth. This thought of the fragment and the interrelationship between images, if it refers back to the interest of this period in logic and language, propels us in the same way into a delinearized space that revolutionizes the modes of reading and writing.

If the first video artists thought of their art as electronic cinema, narrative appeared quite differently from that encountered in classical cinema. No longer unfolding in linear fashion, reading such works was made associative and the order of the elements appeared irrelevant to the process of understanding their messages. It was a revolution in the modes of transmission of knowledge the shock of which we are still feeling half a century later.

The sampling of sounds and images, the work on repetition via electro-digital audiovisual loops, their staging in installations, embody the idea of building and rebuilding space in time. Space does not only unfold in the image as we have seen above, but it also expresses itself in the real world, on screen matrix devices that force the mind to associate the images between them.

The video installations presented in 'Mémoires vives' left a mark on their time but, in some cases, have rarely been exhibited since. Here is an opportunity then for spectators to be able to roam among or pass in front of the screens of *Moon is the Oldest TV* [Paik, 1976-2000], *All Vision* [Steina, 1976], *The West* [Steina, 1983], *Borealis* [Steina, 1993], *Schubert* [Paik, 1989], and *Pyrospheres* [Steina, 2005]; or raise their head and admire the *Video Chandelier No. 1* [Paik, 1989] suspended under the glass dome of the exhibition site.

In this exhibition, I support the hypothesis that the proliferation of screens both in private and public space, the large number of cables necessary to connect them as well as the multiple

conceptual links that we form in our heads to articulate and relate images one to the other have paved the way for the advent of the hypertextual thought that is now so characteristic of our society. Non-linearity is the norm, as is the infinity of possible paths between documents. The database and the algorithm that binds elements together are the new symbolic forms of representation, as was classical perspective for the Renaissance. Three works express three moments of this increasing delinearization of information: first, *Schubert* [1989], one of the many robots assembled by Paik using old televisions and radios. In this work, images and sounds are still visibly connected to each other, and their spatial configuration takes the form of a person wearing a large red hat on his head, which is in fact a gramophone horn. Steina's *Machine Vision* [1978] presents a second moment in this history of the delinearization of information by proposing a device designed to shatter the perspectival space inherited from the Renaissance. Six suspended screens, spread out at regular intervals, display images from six cameras installed on tripods. They look in different directions in space and are 'augmented' by articulated devices made with motors, mirrors and lenses. The space of the room as shown on the suspended screens is floating, unstable, always in motion, elusive and fractured. The third moment in this too brief overview moves our meditation on to the virtual world, a delinearized space par excellence where all the relationships linking things between them evolve in real time according to the requests of users. *TMWKTM* [2009-15], a generative work of SLIDERS\_lab, proposes the spatial conception of a 'film' that is no longer really one since, from now on, it is a film cut into pieces that the audience witnesses. The broken narrative link between the scenes has resulted in their random scattering by the computer program, converting the original story into an amorphous mass of micro-narratives without temporal and causal connection.

For the first edition of the Biennale 'Update', a concept I created in 2006 at the request of the Liedts-Meesen Foundation, the basement, ground floor and first floor of the exhibition space were considered from a geological viewpoint. 'Each level', I wrote at the time, 'is a stratum that promises the spectators a journey from the depths of the earth towards heaven.'

I have not repeated such metaphors for this new edition of 'Update', the seventh, and the works are this time arranged quite freely over the exhibition space, even if some of the larger ensembles articulate the problems involved: on the ground floor visitors will thus encounter installations with many multiple screens while on the first floor they will find several sections: one focusing on an examination of digital language; a second bringing together the *Time/Energy Objects* series of photographs made in 1975 using the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor; a third uniting the devices; and, finally, a fourth dedicated to archives.

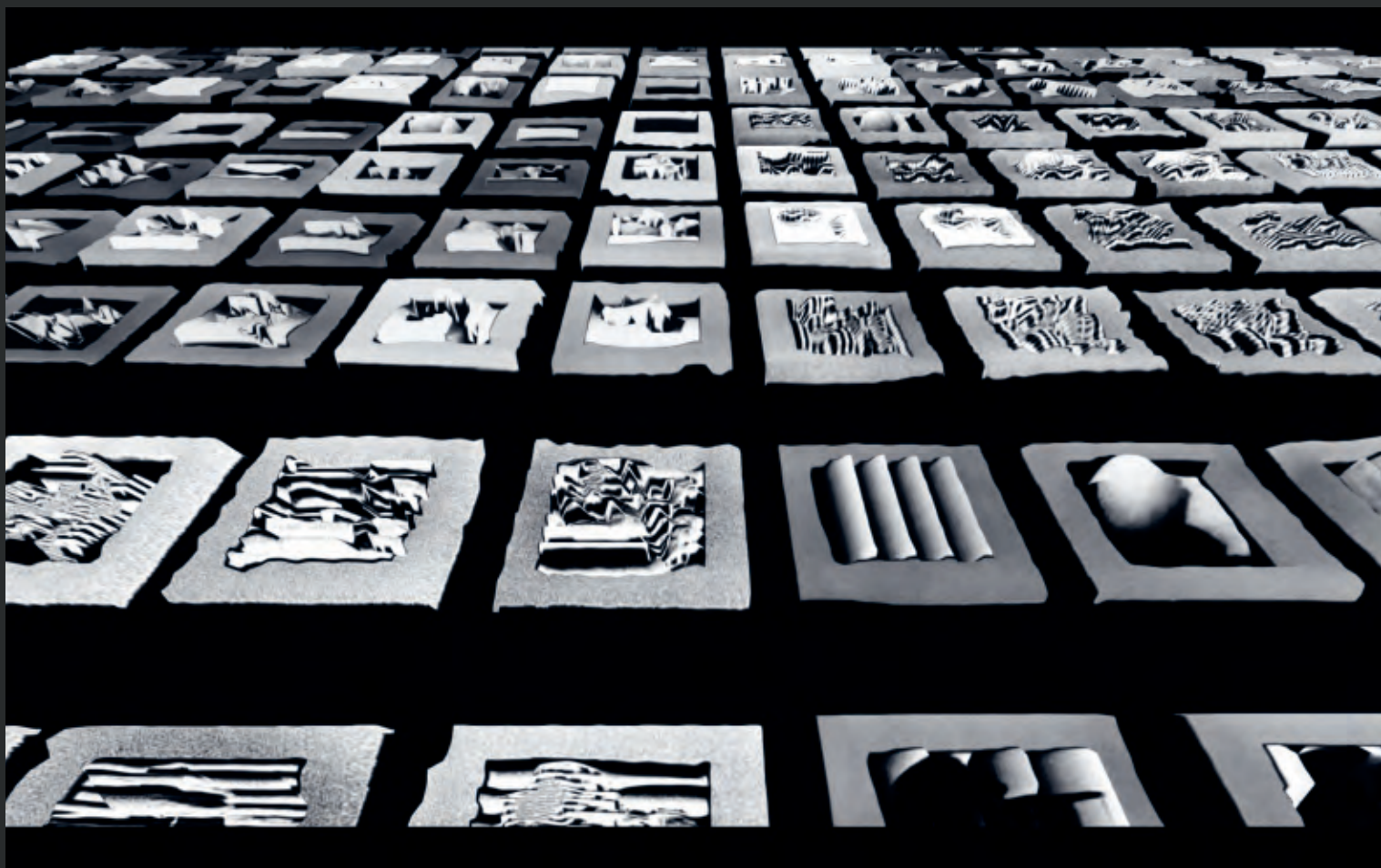
The basement of the exhibition site is also used, in order to accommodate works involving the use of a particular device. This is the case of *Pyrospheres* [Steina, 2002] or *TMWKTM* [SLIDERS\_lab], which call for visitors to wander about and a spatial game in the small dark cells of the basement. It is also for this reason that I chose this deeply evocative place to install Woody Vasulka's *Art of Memory* [1984], whose title<sup>3</sup> explicitly refers to mnemonics, a technique of organized remembrance following memory architectures that often adopted the shape of the labyrinth, the cavern, or the cave.

'Mémoires vives', the title of this exhibition, directly refers to this capacity of human memory to draw out memories, to update them by removing them from the places where they were previously stored. The video works of the past thus function as memories set in motion by their present-day counterparts: indeed, the whole exhibition offers a look at the past to better understand the present times.

SLIDERS\_lab  
[F. Curien, J.-M. Dallet, H. Jolly],  
*Digital Vocabulary*,  
experimental digital  
video, 2014. [Tribute  
to Woody Vasulka,  
*A Syntax of Binary  
Images*, 1978].

-----  
SLIDERS\_lab  
[F. Curien, J.-M. Dallet, H. Jolly],  
*Digital Vocabulary  
Sculpture*, 3d forms  
on a light box, 2016.  
[Tribute to Woody  
Vasulka, *A Syntax of  
Binary Images*, 1978].













WOODY VASULKA  
*TIME/ENERGY OBJECTS*  
1975

The *Time/Energy Objects* series presents thirteen pictures made using the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor. This image synthesizer breaks the rules of linear perspective used in video cameras, themselves based on the age-old principles of the camera obscura. With the Rutt/Etra, the image frees itself from reality and can be generated simply by the modulation of time and energy. In other words, the object photographed does not come from the real world and is not a luminous imprint left on a photosensitive surface; on the contrary, it comes from the modulation of the energy potentials which encode light, coupled to fluctuations of time periods.

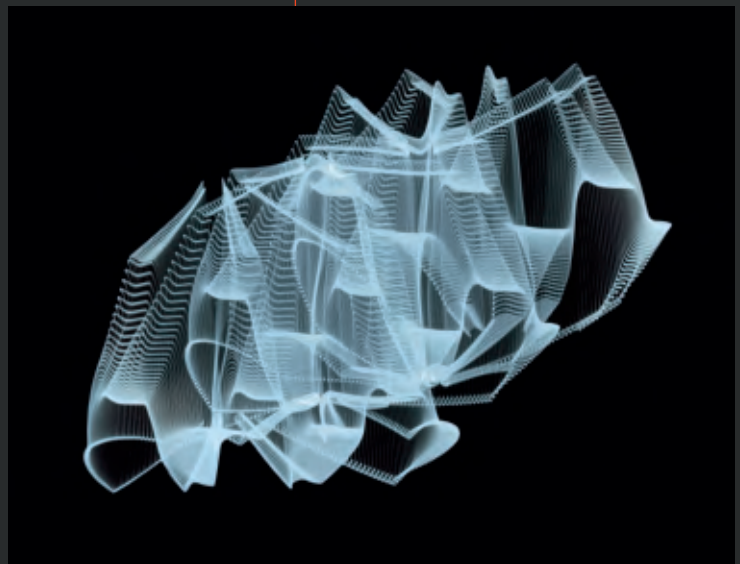
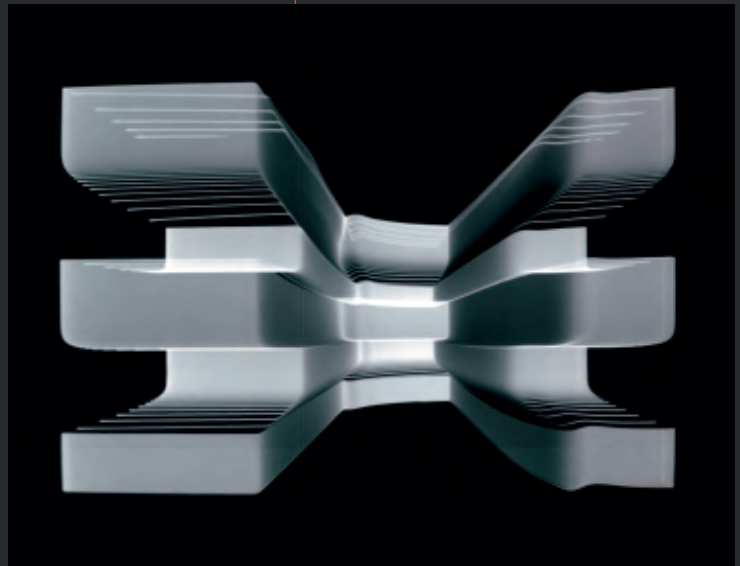
As Woody Vasulka noted in 1975: 'It now becomes possible to move precisely and directly between a conceptual model and a constructed image. This opens a new self-generating cycle of design

within consciousness and the eventual construction of new realities without the necessity of external referents as a means of control.'

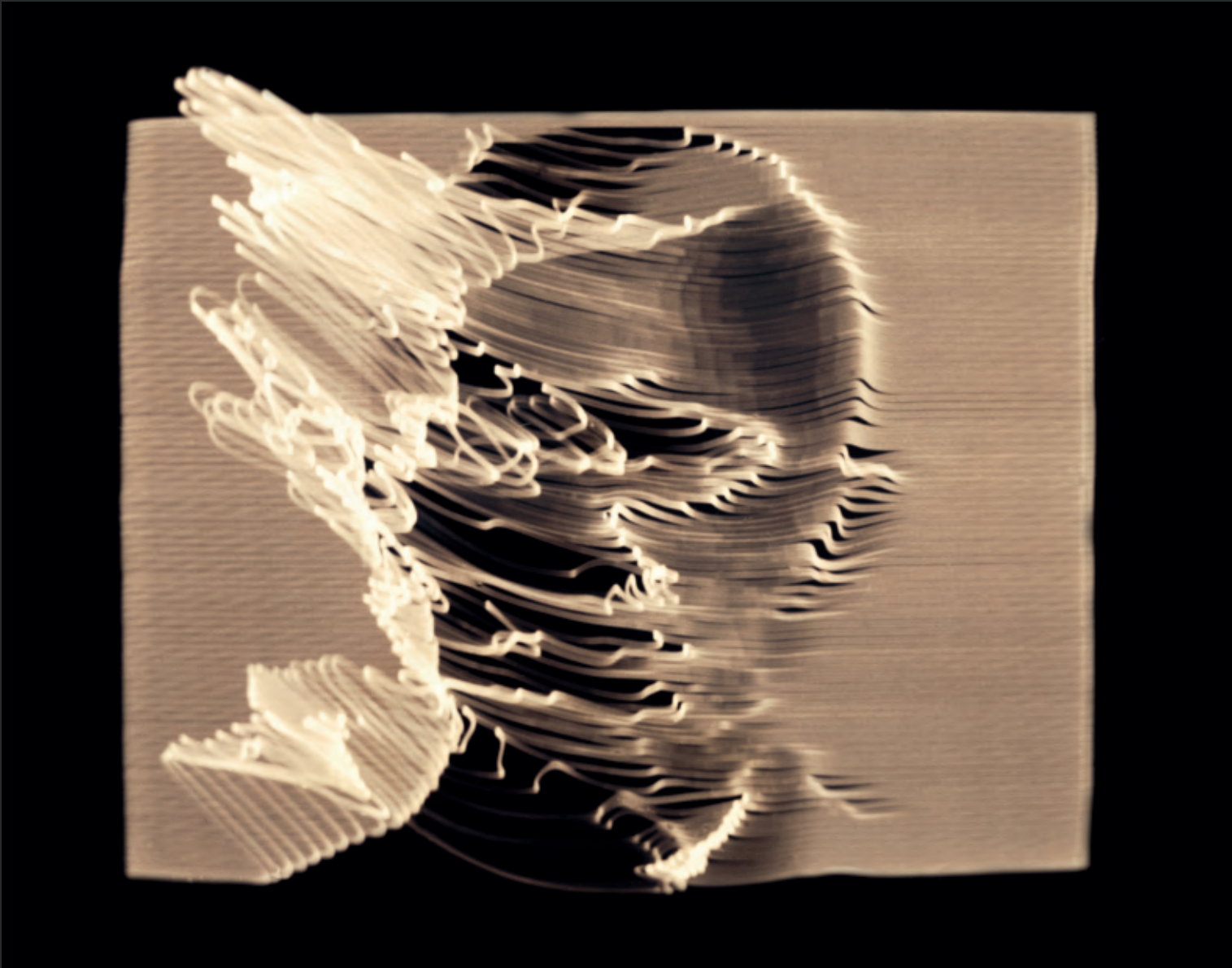
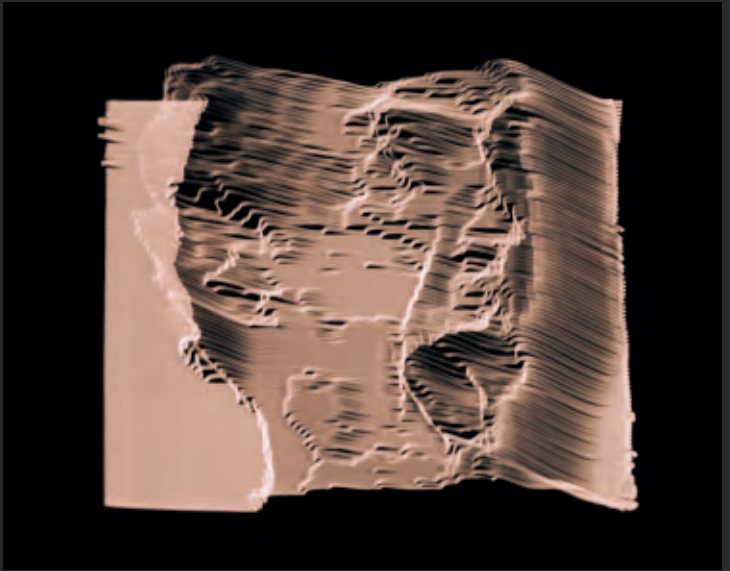
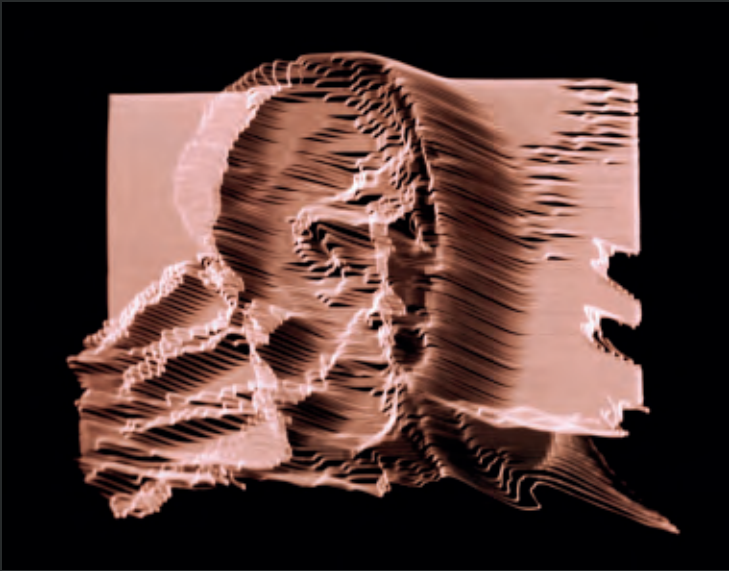
The *Time/Energy Objects* series is a more 'artistic' version of another work realized that same year – 1975 – using the Rutt/Etra Scan Processor: *Time/Energy Structure of the Electronic Image*. This series of images is highly didactic and proposes, in the form of four tables, an experiment on the visualization of three types of energy characterized by sinusoidal, triangular, and square waves whose variations in time and space Vasulka observes.

Vasulka's obsession with understanding the phenomena behind the construction of images would also be evident in *Syntax of Binary Images* (1978), at which time a whole generation of video makers will be shifting from an analogue to a digital language.

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120 × 90 cm  
Series of 13 pictures  
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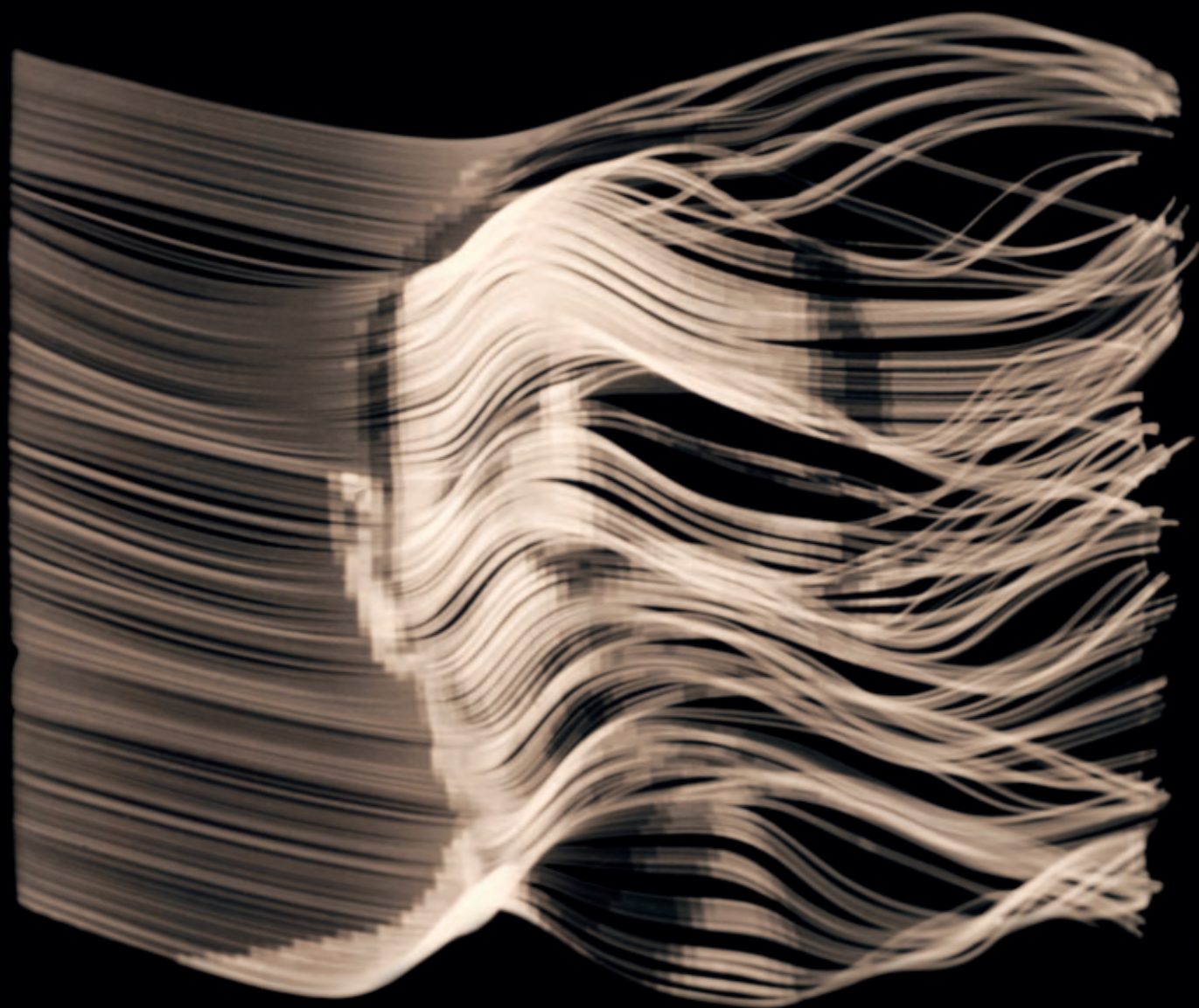












## COLOPHON\_

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