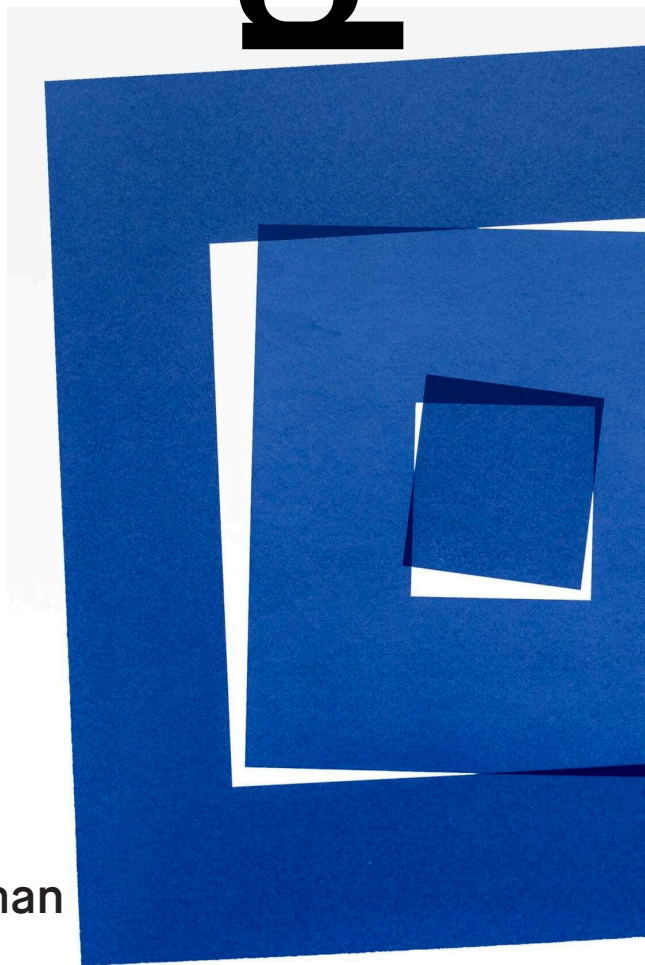


# recreating the past

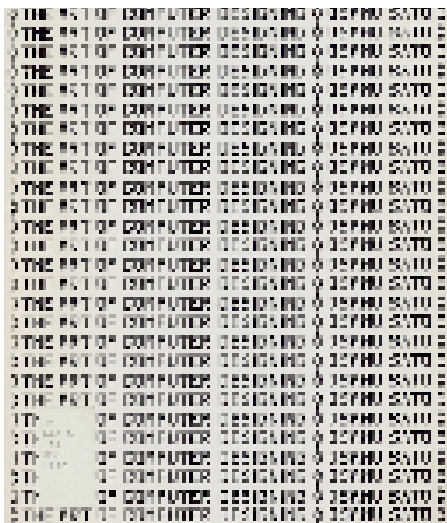
Zach Lieberman  
João Wilbert  
MIT Media Lab  
spring 2019



"Carre coupé en 3" - Vera Molnár



# Why recreate the past?



There is a book from the mid 90s called “The Art of Computer Designing” by Osamu Sato, which focuses on using the computer as a generative design tool. In the afterword, he thanks his inspirations, such as members of the Bauhaus, and he imagines what kinds of work they would do with computers. The last line of the afterword really struck me when I read it:

**“The work of past ages accumulates and is remade again.”**

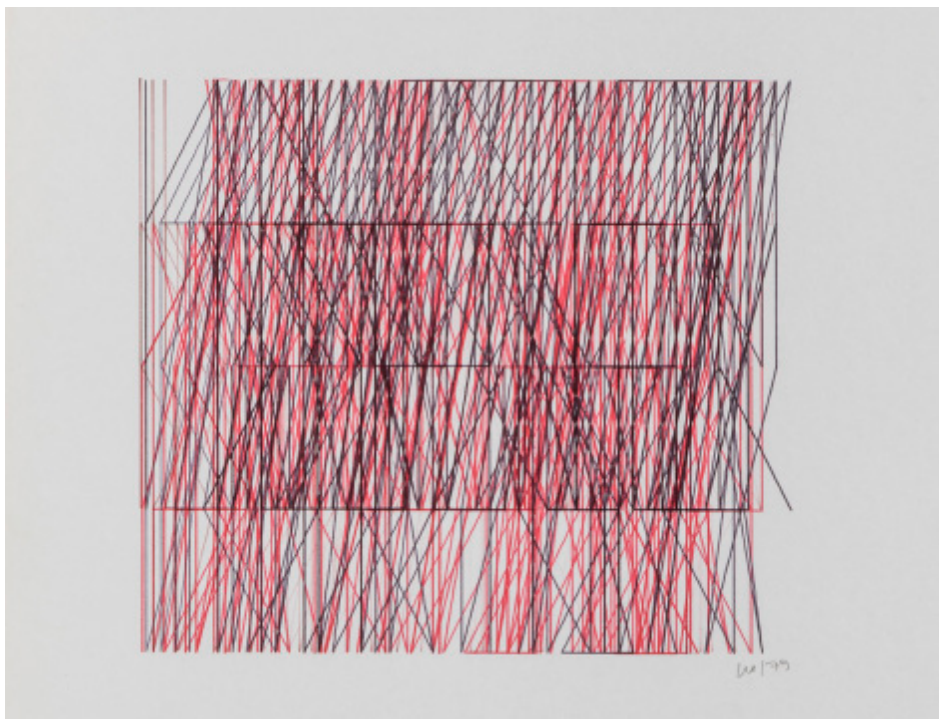
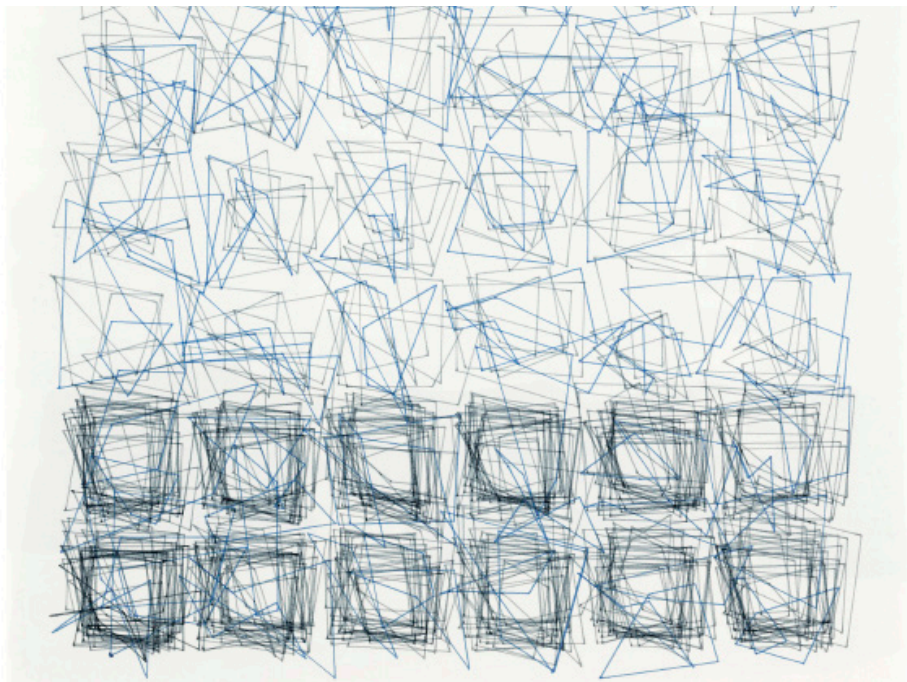
I love this sentence because it suggests for students the past as both a gift and a responsibility. The gift is that the past is there for you to engage with — artists and designers from different ages have a great deal to tell us about our current time. It’s not just a gift though, it’s also a given responsibility to recreate the past with today’s voice.

The class we ran this term was really simple. Each session we focused on a different artist and studied their work collectively. The homework assignment was simple too: recreate one of the artists works using modern tools. On its face it sounds uncreative to copy something, but the act of copying teaches us how to look more closely and looking closely is a key to craft.

One thing I always appreciate in this class is the gap between the recreated work and the original. When we would look at homework together those gaps would often spark intense discussion and debate, moments that are the key to learning. We use the act of copying to engage with the past, to try to bring important voices into the room and to learn more about the craft of computational design and media art.

This booklet is a collection of some of the artists we studied during the semester, whose words and work have inspired our own.

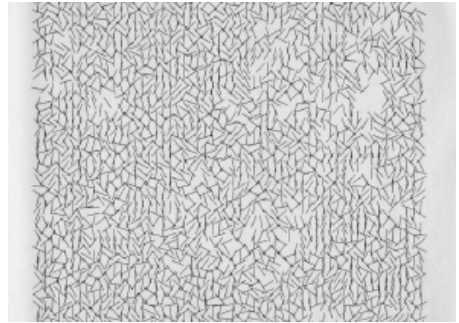
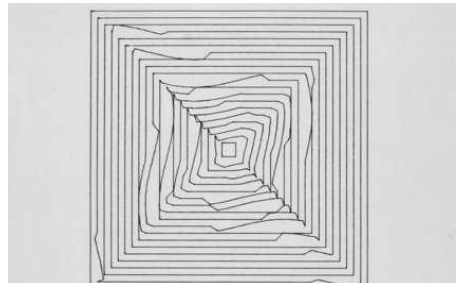
- zach lieberman



**“I tried to find the moment when you don’t understand (that the line has been deviated) but you have this sentiment of uncertainty – the fragility.”**

**- *Vera Molnár***

A pioneer of computer and algorithmic art, Vera Molnár was truly visionary in that much of her early artwork was created without a computer. Rather, she employed the use of her “machine imaginaire” developing sets of rules and then executing them in the way that she imagined computers would. She not only wrote and used algorithms, but internalized them – going so far as to make calculations and perform iterative steps by hand. This likely shaped her artistic sensibilities.





John Whitney working with his mechanical analogue computer. Photo: Charles Eames.





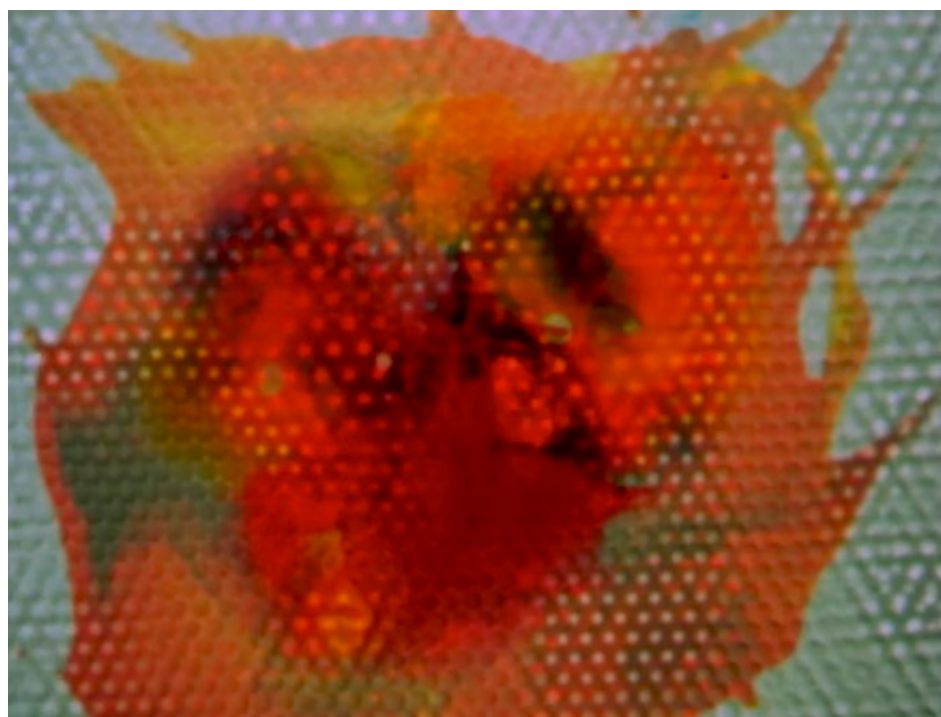
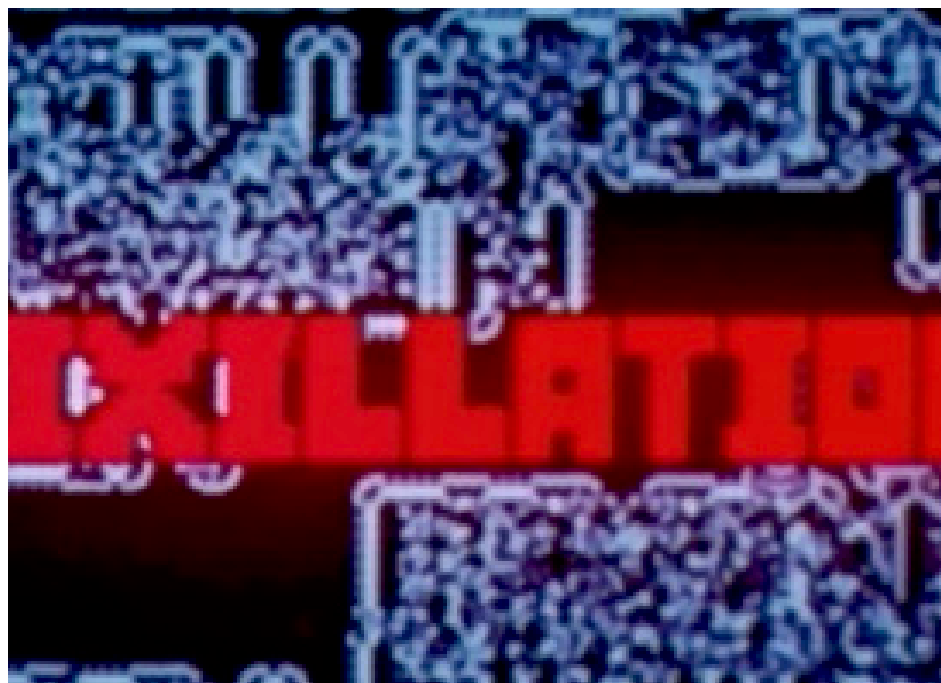
John Hales Whitney, Sr. was a pioneer in the space of computer animation. An animator, composer and inventor, Whitney was known for using scientific tools for art experimentation in order to create design machines that would help him realize his incessant intrigue of orchestrated harmonics and pendulum traces.

He successfully converted a World War II M-5 anti-aircraft gun director to create a mechanical drawing machine that was able to precisely control a set of cameras that would maneuver above the artwork.

**“My compositions at best are intended to point a way toward future developments in the arts.”**

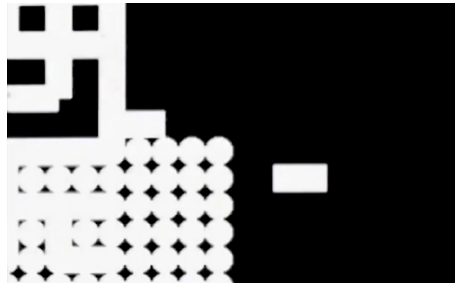
**“Structured motion begets emotion”**

***- John Whitney***





**“The function of the artist is to provide imaginary scenes that would otherwise be impossible to see. The viewer, as collaborator, makes the illusions work.”**

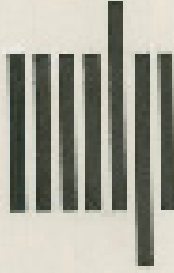


## **- *Lillian Schwartz***



Lillian Schwartz played a pioneering role in establishing computers as an artistic medium while working as an artist at Bell Labs in the late 60s and early 70s, creating abstract animations linking film, computation and music. She used the science that surrounded her as inspiration: in her artwork atoms, fractals, and organic fluids gathered at the futuristic Bell Labs interact with sharp computational flashes and forms, all on a canvas informed by her calligraphy and painting practice.





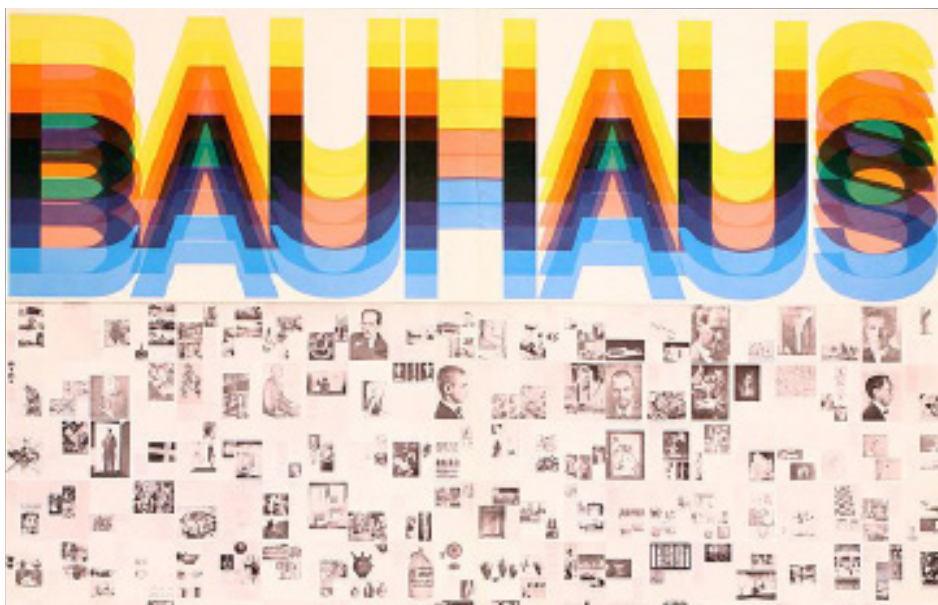
**"I have a profound disdain for answers. We do a lot of groping here, I don't think there are answers. I think there are thoughts."**

**- *Muriel Cooper***

One could imagine that Muriel Cooper could be speaking exactly these words in the meeting depicted in the photograph on the top right. A book designer, a researcher, an educator, "a modernist but an uneasy Swiss" as she once said.

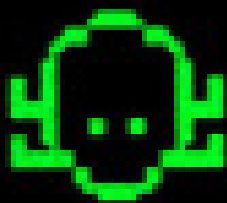
She was the first Director of the MIT Press, as well as the creator of its iconic

colophon: seven bars that represent the lowercase letters *imtpi* as abstracted books on a shelf. A pioneer not only in the print medium, she co-founded the Visible Language Workshop group at the MIT Media Lab, where she later became the first woman to be tenured. Working at the forefront of techno-optimist innovation in the 70s and 80s



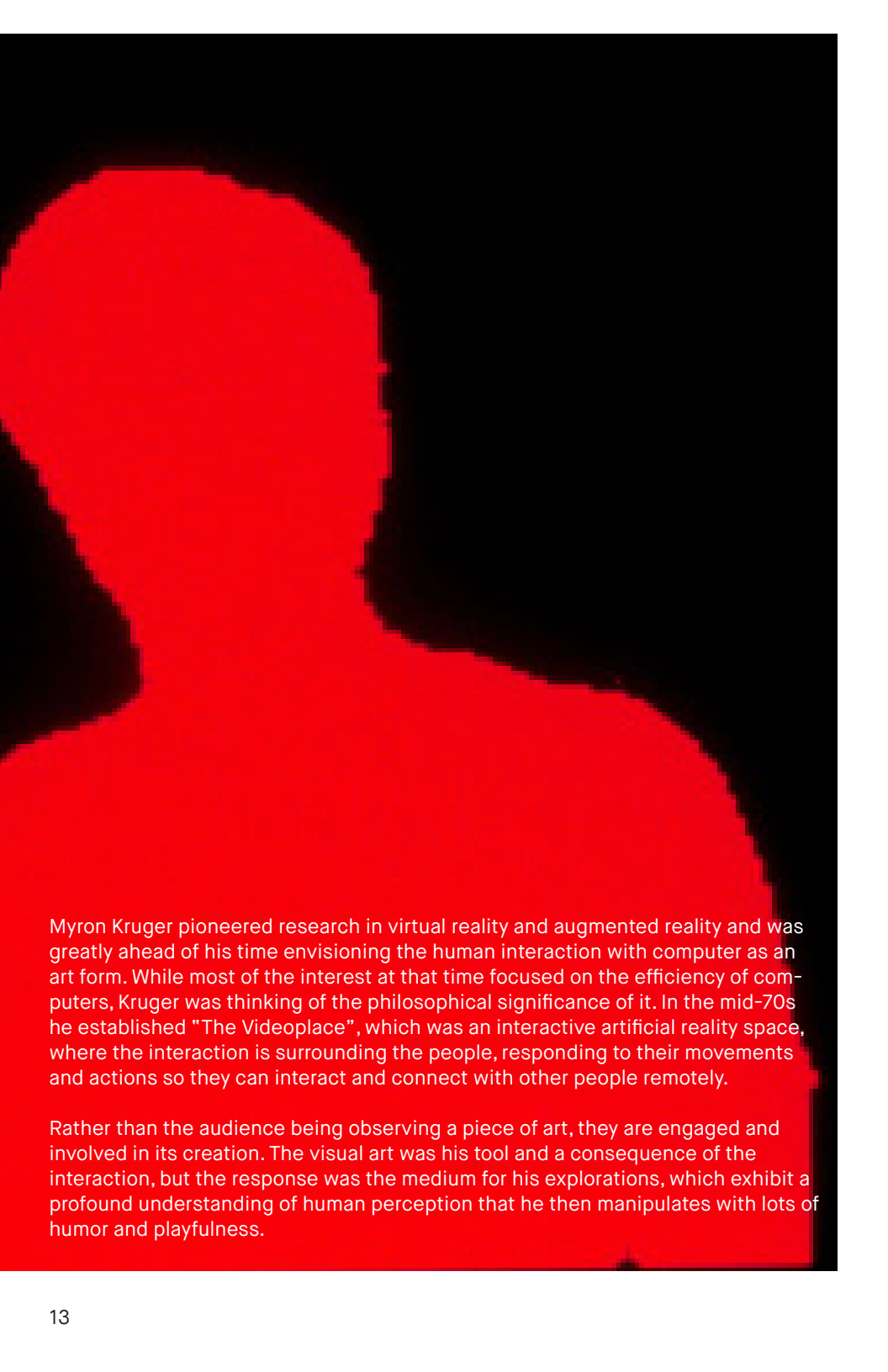
she approached computation with a unique dynamism, sense of design and open-mindedness.

She passed away unexpectedly and early at the age of 68, but remains contemporary in a world where everything swiftly becomes dated.



**"I thought of the encounter of Human and Machine as the central drama of our time and wanted to be on the front line."**

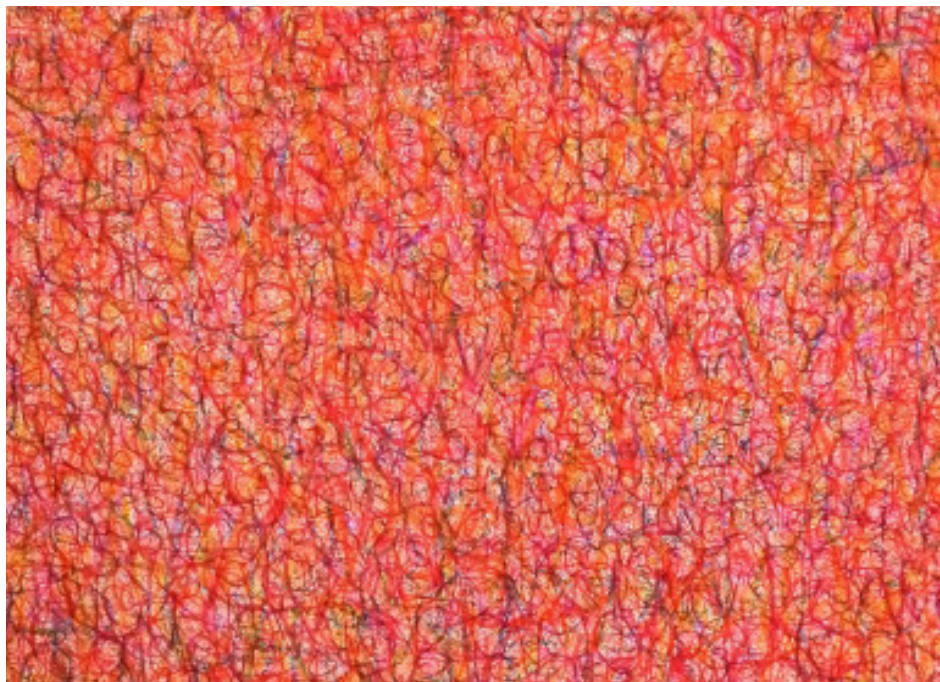
**- *Myron Krueger***



Myron Kruger pioneered research in virtual reality and augmented reality and was greatly ahead of his time envisioning the human interaction with computer as an art form. While most of the interest at that time focused on the efficiency of computers, Kruger was thinking of the philosophical significance of it. In the mid-70s he established "The Videoplace", which was an interactive artificial reality space, where the interaction is surrounding the people, responding to their movements and actions so they can interact and connect with other people remotely.

Rather than the audience being observing a piece of art, they are engaged and involved in its creation. The visual art was his tool and a consequence of the interaction, but the response was the medium for his explorations, which exhibit a profound understanding of human perception that he then manipulates with lots of humor and playfulness.





**“The first portraits that I made were more about visual experimentation that served as answers to things I was thinking about.”**

**- *Nancy Burson***



From early collaborations at MIT using Nicholas Negroponte's digitizer machine to make provocative composite images of different ages, races and genders to controversially blending Trump and President Putin's faces together on the cover of Time magazine, Nancy Burson has pushed the boundaries of her patented image morphing technology to explore the new forms and meaning that can emerge from combining different images together.

This compelling process of blending and overlaying images on top of each other opens up possibilities for new interpretations, as the resulting pieces take on a richly ambiguous dynamism through which hidden patterns can be revealed.





**“There is a certain behavior of the electronic image that is unique, it’s liquid, it’s shapeable, it’s clay, it’s an art material, it exists independently.”**

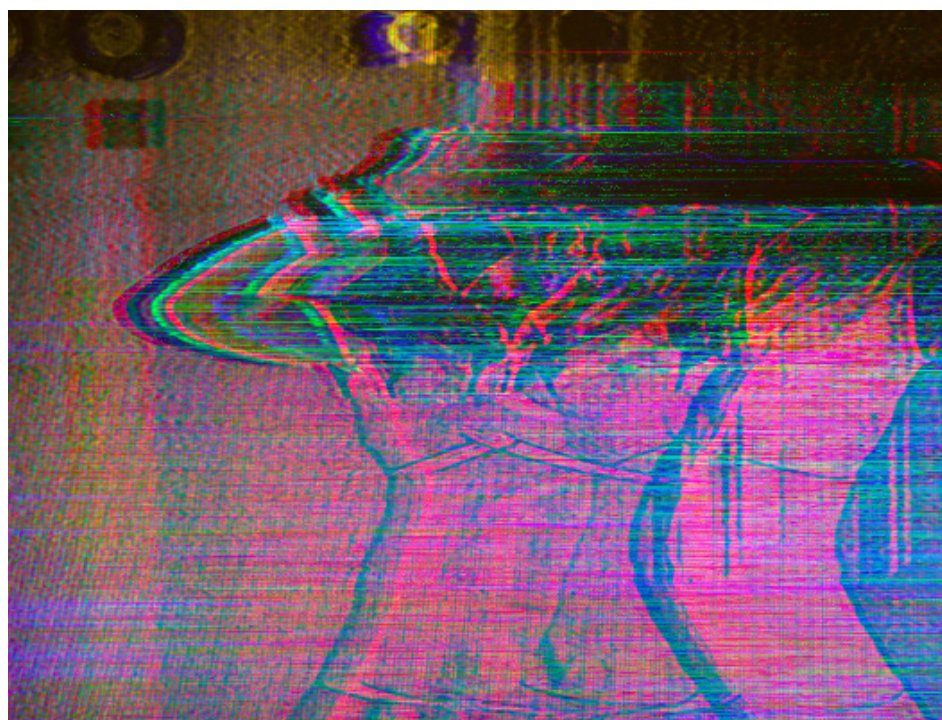
**- *Woody Vasulka***



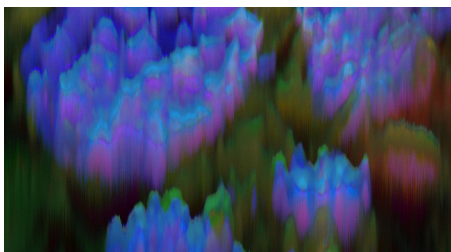
Working at the peak of analog animation, Steina and Woody Vasulka established a materialist creative practice that remains a powerful model for artists producing electronic images. Sampling the buffet of experimental video equipment available in the 70s New York, the Vasulkas mapped relations of electronics, generated video, and visual perception in work that contributed to the evolving language of video art. For the Vasulkas, devices like the Rutt/Etra Video Synthesizer allowed creative ac-

cess to video as such, serving as hammers and chisels for the electromagnetic spectrum. *Noisefields* (1974) is one artifact of this metaphysical exploration: a twelve-minute deconstruction of video into two constitutive signals, intensified by Rutt/Etra to an assault on perception. The Vasulkas expanded this material-deconstructive practice in later work by modulating vertical position by brightness, rasterizing 3D heightmaps and rendering complex, representational video equally sculptable.









**“An unexpected moment in a system that calls attention to that system, and perhaps even leads us to notice aspects of that system that might otherwise go unnoticed.”**

**- *Rosa Menkman***

Rosa Menkman is a Dutch artist, curator and researcher. Her work focuses on noise artifacts that result from accidents in both analogue and digital media (such as glitch, encoding and feedback artifacts). Although many people perceive these accidents as negative experiences, she emphasizes their positive consequences: these artifacts facilitate an important insight into the otherwise obscure alchemy of standardization, which takes place through resolutions: the creation of solutions or protocols, and their black-boxed, unseen, forgotten or obfuscated compromises and alternative possibilities.



## **Students**

Nikhil Singh  
Pip Mothersill  
Adam Horowitz  
Kalli Retzepi  
Hila Mor  
Sam Posner  
Takatoshi Yoshida  
Océane Boulais  
Joanne Leong  
Kyung Yun Choi

Thank you João and Zach! <3