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Interview with Benoît Palop

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Benoît Palop.
Photo: Émeline Rosendo.

INTERVIEW WITH

BENOÎT

PALOP

Nathalie Bachand: I wish to begin the interview with a question that will help our readers learn more about you, Benoît. I would like to know more about your career path. What led you to the digital arts? How did you begin? And where does your passion—I think we can use the word "passion" in your case ;)—for digital art and, more particularly, for web art come from?

Benoît Palop: I followed a fairly standard path, and I think that my passion for technology comes from my father who introduced me to computers and video games from an early age, in the era of the Amiga 500 and Nintendo. It was impossible to get me out of the house; I was completely addicted—in the positive sense of the word.

In terms of education, I completed a Master in Visual Arts, Design & New Media at Sorbonne, Paris 1—nice on paper, but somewhat soporific in the lecture hall—followed by a second Master in Philosophy & Exhibition Studies at Lyon 1, which I finished at Florida International University, in Miami, alternating between an internship, courses, and beach parties. It was a fun period and a great place to live. After doing another internship in New York, I moved to Montreal, where I found my first post-school job, now 4 years, 3 months, and 23 days ago.

Without any hesitation, I would say that Montreal led me to the digital arts. It's true that my studies familiarized me with emerging art practices and exposed me to current issues, but as with many of the trajectories offered in French universities, everything often boils down to redundant jargon and theory. At least this was the case a few years ago. Once I came here, I saw things in a more concrete and tangible way, and I quickly became aware of the artistic and creative potential in this city. I started working for the Society for Arts and Technology (SAT) and found myself on the front lines, so to speak.

At the same time, I began writing regularly for The Creators Project and being increasingly interested in creative art practices that explore the internet, social or other types of networks, as well as "screen culture," and which try to decipher and examine the impact of advancements in technology and the web on culture, society, and behaviour. As an internet freak, I feel super involved.

N. B.: A two-part question then: When you say that Montreal led you to the digital arts, what did you discover exactly, in addition to the SAT (the front lines where you work), that was particularly illuminating? The Creators Project! This is an excellent platform for everything that is artistic-geek-DIY-or-not. Seen from the outside (at least from my perspective), you have become a resource person at TCP for everything we might designate as "internet art." Did this evolve naturally, due to your affinity for this type of art?

B. P.: Digital culture is omnipresent in Montreal; this is no secret. Whether we consider the architectural landscape, the many events dedicated to the digital arts, such as ELEKTRA-BIAN, IX Symposium (SAT), MUTEK or Sight & Sound (Eastern Bloc), the community of creators and artists, as well as the many organizations involved, it is practically impossible not to notice this buzzing activity. The energy is such that at any given moment, all those interested or loosely involved in new media and digital art get swept up and want to contribute in their own way. This sense of constant creation had a significant impact on me at the beginning.

The Creators Project is a rather interesting platform, created through a partnership between VICE Media Group and Intel. At the time when Julia Kaganskiy—now Director of New Inc. in New York—was the Global Editor, TCP focused on new technologies and digital culture at the heart of the creative process.

The scope is somewhat larger now and includes various creative and artistic hori-

zons: there is something for everyone and for every taste, which should not be taken for granted. Despite this change in direction and shift in focus and editorial policy, I have tried to remain faithful to my initial aims: to continue supporting those involved in the cultural and art community of the internet as much as possible, and to contribute to its dissemination and valorisation in any way I can. Yet I also keep an eye on what's happening "at large" in Montreal so as to promote local work as often as possible.

N. B.: Web art in Montreal: I have the impression that it is still in its early stages, at least compared to what is happening internationally, particularly in the art community—artists as organizations—in the United States, which is currently flourishing. Can you talk a bit about this? Name some names ;).

B. P.: It is true that Montreal is not a nerve centre of net art, even though some of us are seriously involved, and organizations like Eastern Bloc, Studio XX, and Agence TOPO have already taken an interest in it. Considering that net art has evolved through the digital art landscape, Montreal artists and disseminators are gradually starting to pay attention to it, and they don't have a choice if they want to remain current and part of the conversation. I really look forward to seeing how this will evolve and especially how the organizations and events dedicated to digital art will capitalize on the situation.

In my view, New York remains the epicentre, particularly with the remarkable work of Kelani Nichole and the network of artists she has gathered through TRANSFER gallery, but also thanks to influential figures like curator Lindsay Howard, the many galleries and art centres, the media, platforms and organizations like *Rhizome*, the local artists or those passing through, all of which make New York a real hub of experimentation and reflection on this kind of practice by creators, artists, critics, and curators. However, I have been assured that the internet has no boundaries.

N.B.: I want to return to what you said earlier: "I also keep an eye on what's happening 'at large' in Montreal so as to promote local work as often as possible." In fact, you do much more that simply keep an eye on what's happening, since you also have an emerging, though solid, curating practice. I am thinking particularly of the event you organized last year, in collaboration with Sabrina Ratté, Erin Gee, and Tristan Steven at the MAC: *X+1*. I imagine that this event developed out of a desire to organize something that was more than simply an evening of net art, something that also included activities of discussion and exchange. Can you remind me of the concept of the evening and also the participating artists? I remember that there were many of them. I would also like you to speak about your vision as a curator—what this vision is made of and what it is based on?

B. P.: Yes, it is true that I wanted and needed to get involved in another way besides writing, and the next logical step was to start working as a curator. In November 2014, Sabrina, Tristan, and I loosely discussed the idea of organizing an event. I think that the first time we talked about it was after a performance by Sabrina and Roger (Tellier-Craig) at Sala Rossa. Erin then joined us on the project and, a few weeks after discussing the concept, we proposed it to the team at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, who then offered to present it as part of a Nocturne evening.

The concept was simple, but resonated particularly well with the social behaviour and interactions created by the web. We each invited artists from our personal networks who, in turn, each invited another artist: a curating method that emphasized URL social activities, as well as open source culture and the exponential nature of creation in the internet age.
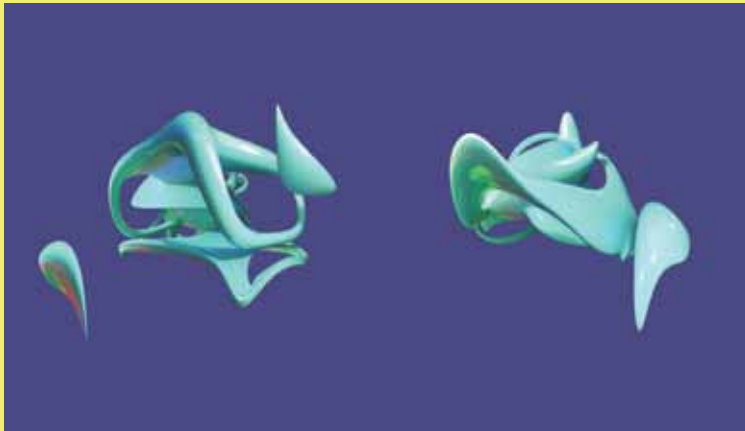
Tyson Parks, *Slide I*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

LaTurbo Avedon, *ID*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

The artists set to work, and we ended up with a great team, which included Morehshin Allahyari, Anthony Antonellis, LaTurbo Avedon, Jeremy Bailey, Brenna Murphy & Birch Cooper, Adam Ferriss, Émilie Gervais, Claudia Hart, Faith Holland, Sara Ludy, Claudia Mate, Lorna Mills, Sam Newell, Eva Papamargariti, Nicolas Sassoon, to name just a few. Ultimately, we presented a large panorama of projections (videos, GIFs, and web browsers) that spanned a wide range of aesthetics, creative processes, and approaches. The result was wonderful, eclectic and chaotic all at once, and resonated well with the fluid architecture of the MAC's rotunda. For us, it was important to present these practices to the general public and the artistic microcosm of Montreal, which sometimes still exhibit hesitation before this kind of work. Besides co-curating *X+1*, Sabrina, Erin, and Tristan also participated in the event, since they are very talented artists.

It is still somewhat difficult for me to assume the title of curator. I am not used to being at the helm, even though the word "emerging" is there to compensate for my lack of confidence and underline the fact that I am in a period of observation and learning. I would however say that my vision as an emerging curator is to explore screen culture and to examine how the internet is used as a creative tool and dissemination space, not only in strictly formal or aesthetic terms, but also in terms of revealing its tendencies to alter, or even generate, certain social, political, cultural, and geographic parameters.

N.B.: It was interesting to discover all these art practices in an offline context, one that was both physical and celebratory: the way in which the works were presented, covering the walls of the MAC's rotunda from one side to the other, made the experience almost immersive (though this is another topic that we will not tackle here ;). The public's experience of net art is far from being insignificant, for while we still only rarely see net art in traditional gallery-type spaces, it saturates the web itself. This makes me think of initiatives like The Wrong, the digital art biennale set up by David Quiles Guillo in 2013-2014 for which you curated a pavilion in 2015-2016. I would like you to talk a little about this experience of curating online, but also about how the web works as a dissemination space versus how a physical space does. Where do you stand vis-à-vis these two modes of dissemination?

B. P.: The experience of The Wrong was extremely interesting and enriching, despite the challenges and negative aspects that the presentation of such a large scale event in an unconventional format can produce. I am grateful to David for giving me this opportunity, which also helped me discover to what extent curating online is hard work, in terms of both choosing the work and creating the pavilion itself. In my case, dividing my time between the conception of the web environment and the conservation aspect proved to be very difficult—especially as a one-man-team—and I would have liked to have more time to develop and solidify certain aspects. One of the nicest things was gathering twenty of my favourite artists inside the same <body>, including Lauren Pelc-McArthur, Tyson Parks, Sarah Weis, Rollin Leonard, Yoshi Sodeoka, V5MT, and others.

The user experience is one of the most important aspects of this type of art practice, especially if we take into account browsing behaviour. Our attention span and patience are very limited, which demands rigorous work in terms of the visual environment and the system of navigation. The experience needs to be simple, quick, and attractive. Add a selection of relevant work, connected by a solid theme, and you will probably end up with a solid project.

I don't want to give a report of all the online projects I explored, but some of them are certainly more substantial than others, not only due to their fluid structures and original formats, but above all thanks to the content that breaks many codes of modern society. Panther Modern Gallery, Cloaque.org, but also many temporary exhibitions, such as the recent *Geographically Indeterminate Fantasies: The Animated GIF as Place*, curated by Paddy Johnson and her team at Art F City, are excellent examples.

Personally, beyond the specific aesthetic of screen-based work and the resulting concerns, I truly appreciate the fact that I can enjoy this kind of work while lying in bed or standing in line at the supermarket.

N.B.: In your opinion, what role will virtual reality (VR) play in the future of net art? Do you think that the evolution of VR will be a determining factor in the evolution of net art? Will it cause a contextual shift from the screen to the virtual environment? I'm thinking of Oculus of course... Will the VR revolution finally happen?

B. P.: These two very different worlds are not really analogous. While the VR experience is compelling and offers new creative perspectives, its very intimate and exclusive context and its less apparent accessibility stand somewhat in contradiction with the internet's open, free, and prolific use by the general public, restricted to the screens of smartphones, tablets, or laptops. These frictions do not allow VR to examine the fundamental issues the internet raises and to offer a type of interaction, spatiality, understanding of the environment—and also of the aesthetic—that is likely to replace the experience of the web. The issues tackled by virtual reality are necessarily different, or at least they are approached from a different angle, which is rather interesting in itself. To be frank, I see and really appreciate the playful and immersive aspect of VR, but I am not always a hundred percent convinced of its relevance from an artistic standpoint. I can nevertheless imagine that at a given moment, we will see a symbiosis develop between VR, internet, and art, and I will be very curious to see this (r)evolution happen.

I would, however, like to stress just how fascinating and disquieting I find watching and analyzing the behaviour of people wearing VR headsets. Yes, this can be considered a kind of voyeurism :).

N.B.: Ah, yes, essentially it means watching people engaged in the act of watching! This does not preclude some galleries from exploring VR: I am thinking, for example, of online galleries like DiMoDA (Digital Museum of Digital Art) created by Alfredo-Salazar-Caro and William Robertson, where visitors can explore a 3D space. It is easy to imagine doing this visit in VR.

However, to conclude, I would like you to briefly discuss post-digital practices, which refer to the web while happening outside of it. Is the web a dream from which we bring objects into the waking world?

B. P.: The web is not a dream… unless I am living a lucid dream wide-awake ;).

Post-digital practices are extremely interesting, since they take a material and critical approach to the web, in the way in which they decontextualize it. I am thinking of art practices that extract material from the web, then recreate it in the pictorial space of a painting, as US artist Petra Cortright does; or even the installation art of Grégory Chatonsky and Dominique Sirois with their *Extinct Memories* project, in which the internet is less a material than it is a subject for consideration. We could discuss this further, but we would be getting too far from the web ;).

N.B.: That's true, and we have to conclude at some point. Thank you, Benoît!
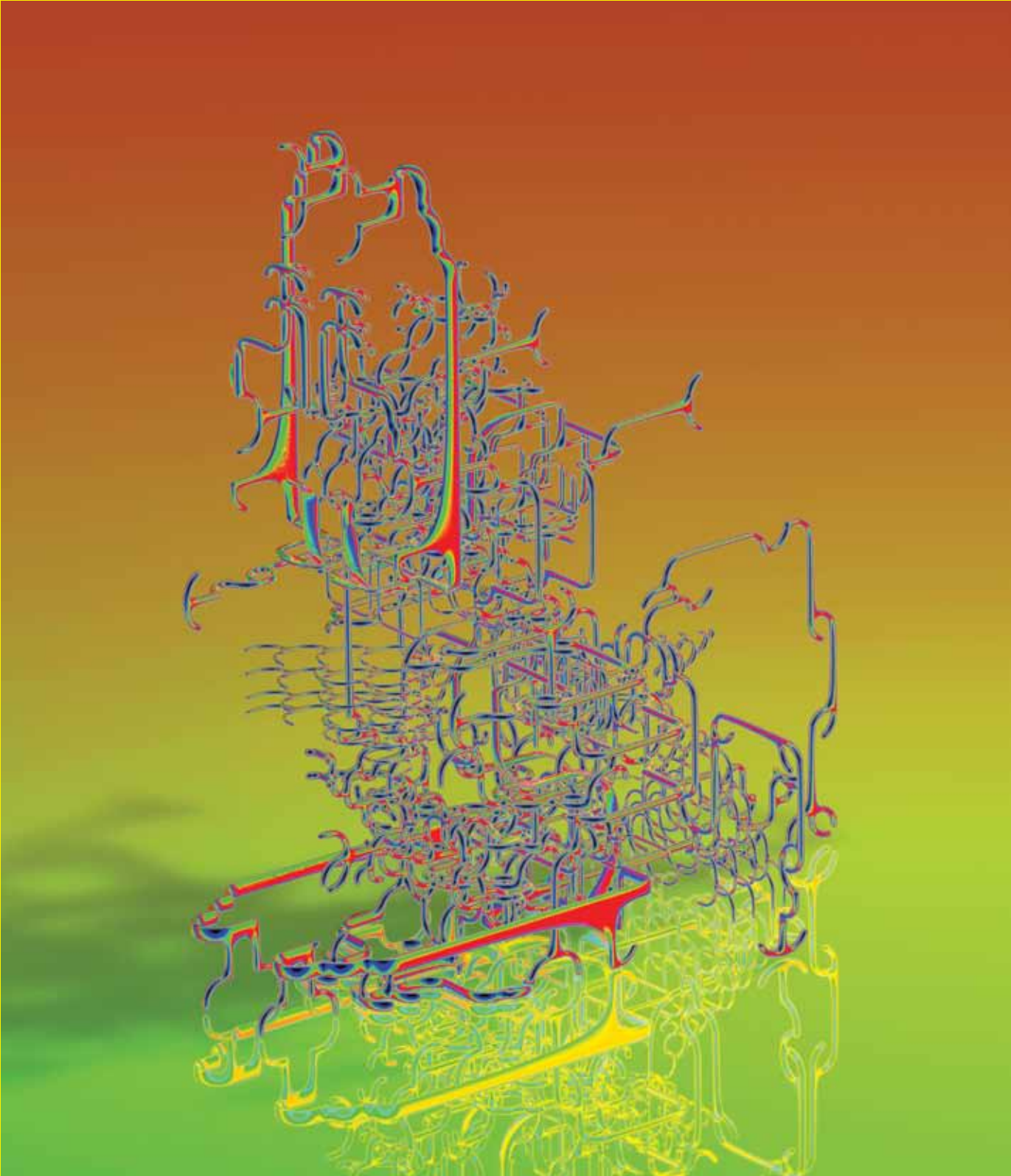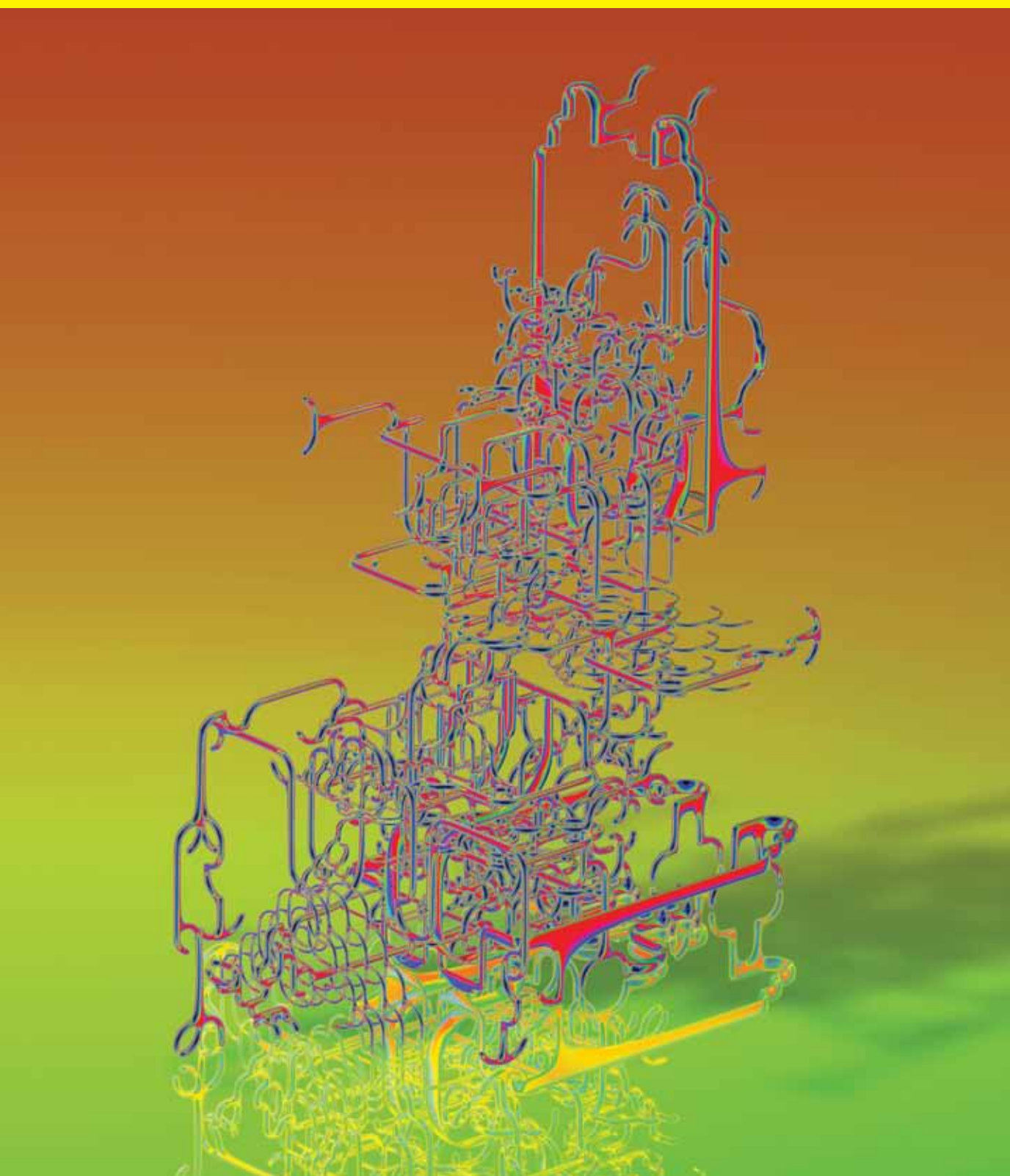
Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

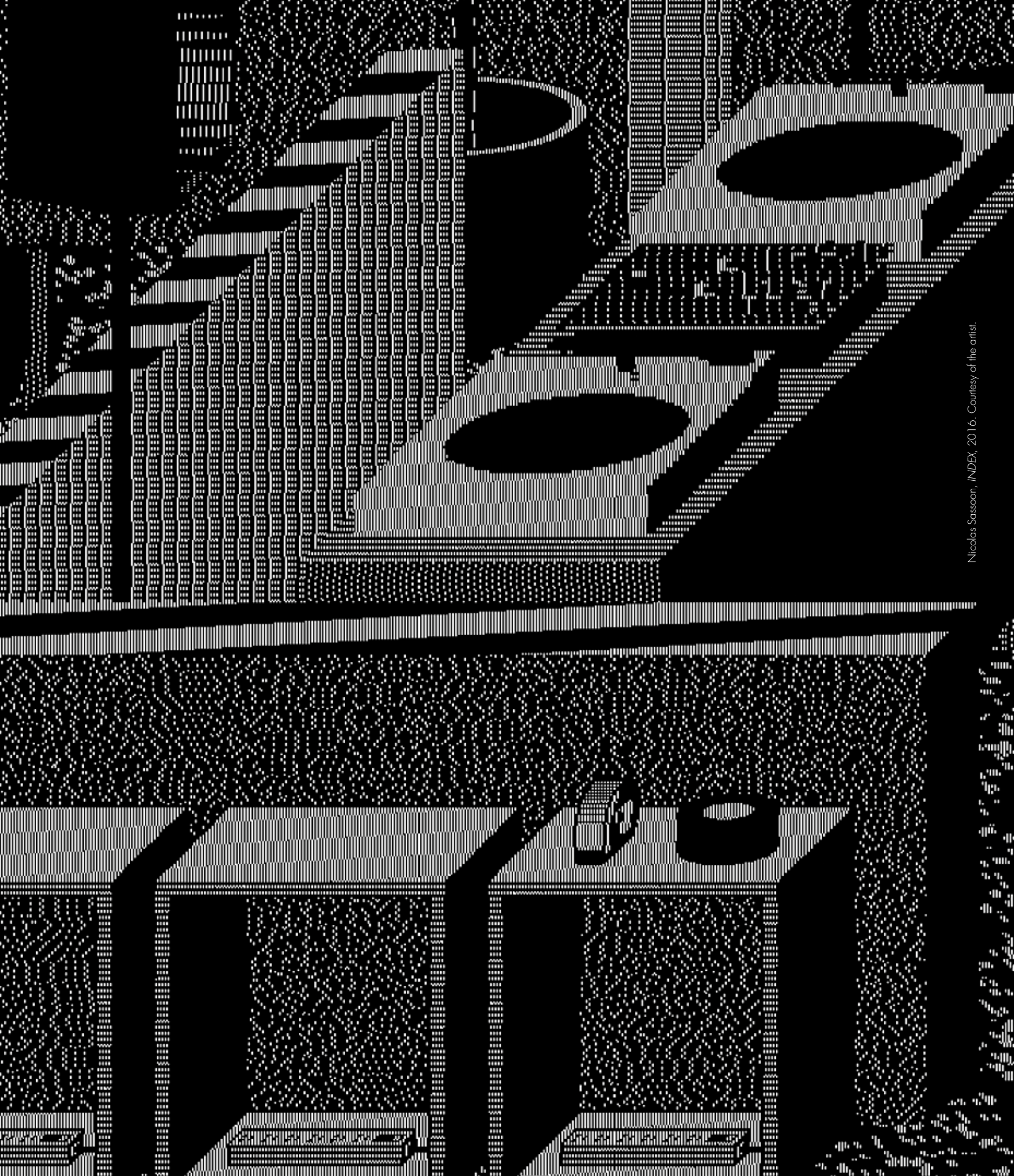Rollin Leonard, *Glitter Swimmer*, 2015. Animated loop. Courtesy of the artist.

Rollin Leonard, *Glitter Swimmer*, 2015. Animated loop. Courtesy of the artist.
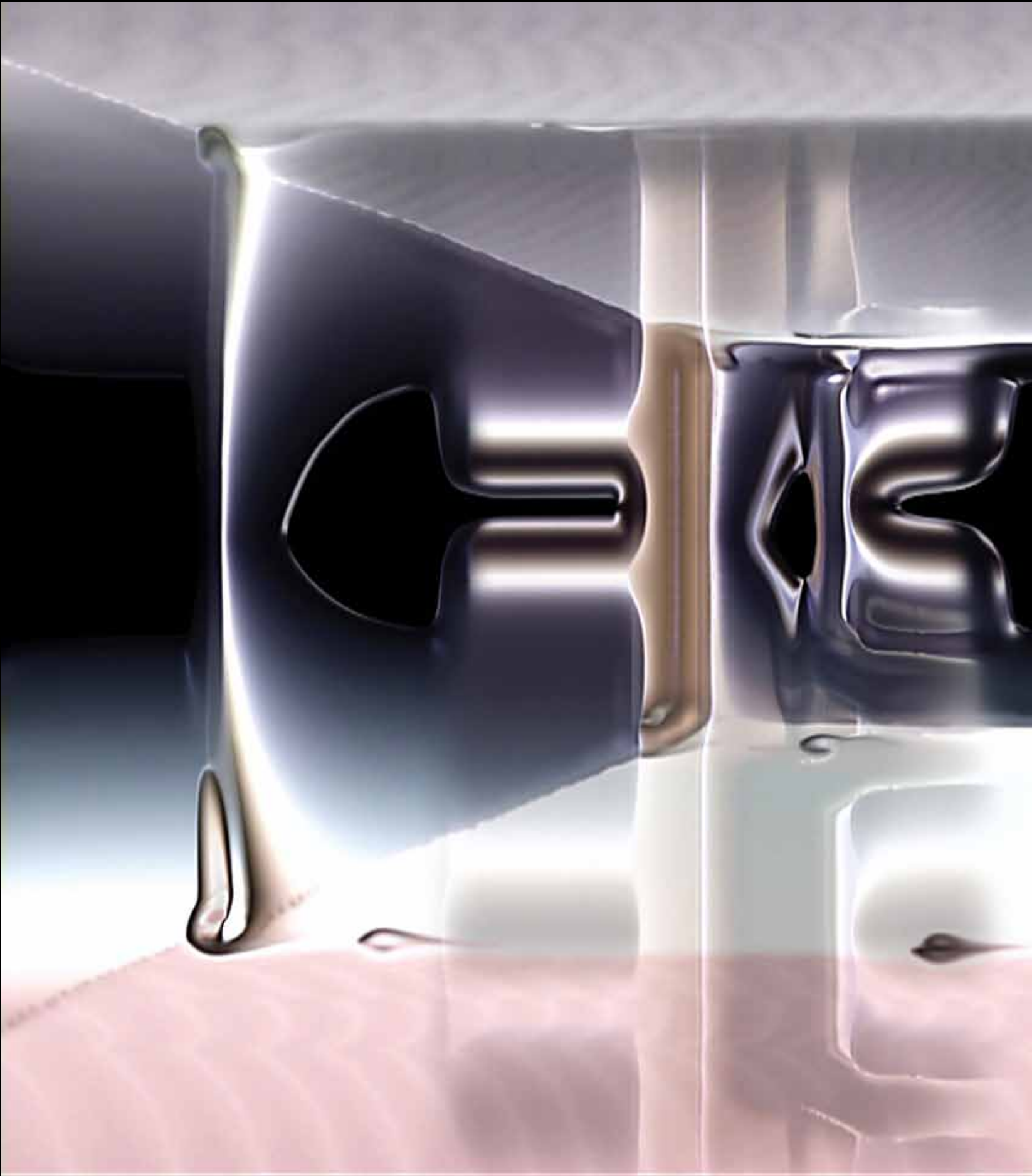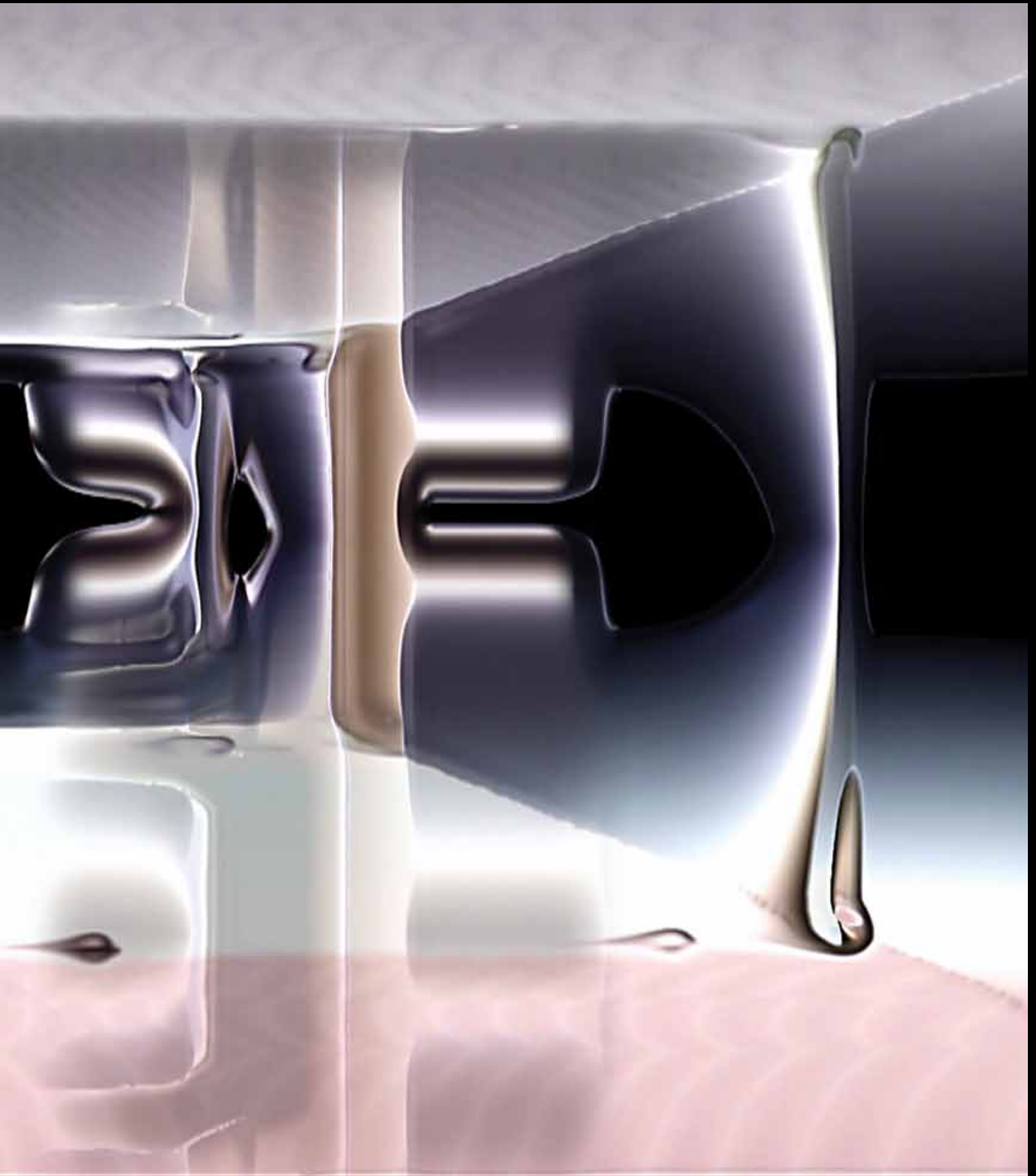
Birch Cooper, *Procedural Knot Stacks,* 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

Sabrina Ratté, *Escales*, 2015. Courtesy of the artist and Laffy Maffei Gallery.

X+1, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2015. Photo © Sébastien Roy.