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**PROGRESSIVE
MOVEMENTS & SLIDES:
SOME TRACKS FOR
A HISTORY OF
SLIDERS_LAB**

By working on the memory and the archive of images, one inevitably ends up, on the one hand, doing media archaeology and, on the other hand, doing a comparative study of different eras by tracking the ruptures, the transferences, and the survivals. The exhibition 'Mémoires vives' addresses a fundamental question: how are new mental worlds built by artists with machines, memory and multiple screens? It is also a matter of understanding what perspectives were opened up by the video art of the 1960s for the digital art of the 1990s, without the video artists always being cognisant of them or the digital artists always recognizing them. The exhibition is both single- and multitrack. The track I will follow for my part is that of the history of the SLIDERS_lab collective, created in 2005 and situated at the crossroads of all these questions - by borrowing once more something of the flow of ideas, in the same places and, especially, through the same problems, that I encountered through its trajectory, both individual and collective - for it is paradoxical, but true, that a successful collective is often one based on its individuals! Progressive shifts, forwards - in history - and afterwards, have highlighted common references, concerns, and enthusiasms. To write the history of SLIDERS_lab requires one to relate to them, to follow in their tracks, and, inevitably, to wander beyond those tracks, too.

I recently invited Jean-Marie Dallet, the plastic artist of SLIDERS_lab, and Frédéric Curien, its musician, to participate in the exhibition 'L'Invention de Morel: la machine à images' [March-July 2018], of which I was the curator, at the Maison de l'Amérique latine in Paris. Adolfo Bioy Casares's novel *La invención de Morel*, published in 1940, has been a profound influence on filmmakers and visual artists, but especially all those who manipulate recorded images and operate what I have called the 'image machine'. SLIDERS_lab offered me a fascinating piece that was very successful: *TMWKTM* [2009-15]. It is a work that belongs to the series of *Topomovies*: delinearized films whose images, instead of following each other on the

screen, are endlessly divided into multiple 'forking paths' [to borrow the beautiful expression of Jorge Luis Borges, a friend of Bioy's]. They could have been labelled 'topofilms' or we could talk about 'topological film'! But the term *Topomovies* expresses better the movement, mobility, emotion, and e-motion: what is expressed and moves from a common source and is transformed.

But back to *TMWKTM*. The slightly barbaric title evokes the name of a machine or code, an encrypted language, or even a bizarre-sounding name of - who knows? - an airline or a rap group! It is in fact the acronym for the title of a film by Alfred Hitchcock, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. What looks like a software name evokes the quest for the Holy Grail or the title of a well-known work by Marcel Duchamp! The material used - because SLIDERS_lab, like the well-known artist I have just mentioned, prefers to use 'found' images, in short readymades adjusted or modified from films and existing photographic or textual documents - is not the most famous version of Hitchcock's film, that is, the one from 1956 shot partly in Morocco, where a little boy, abducted by spies, recognizes the voice of his mother when she sings 'Que sera, sera', but the first version shot in 1934 in the Alps in which it is a little girl who is abducted. The filmmaker was not satisfied with this version, and the second version is neither a remake of the first nor a new film ['Neither quite the same nor quite someone different,' said the poet Verlaine of the woman who appeared in his 'strange and penetrating dream'], but in a sense, the redeployment of the plot, the characters and the situations. A boy replaces the girl; Marrakesh replaces the Alpine resort - which may be Chamonix or Megève, unless it is ... Marienbad, but let's not get distracted by geography [no offence to Alain Resnais!]. Yet the structure remains more or less the same: Hitchcock created a loop, reactivating the image machine twenty years apart.

It is also a redeployment and a loop that are proposed by *TMWKTM*. The approximately 630 sequences that make up Hitchcock's film have been cut up and isolated

by the artists. They form the faces of a gigantic die, rolled relentlessly by a computer program, in control of a video projector, so that dozens of images move across the wall as well as on a large number of small screens. Thus the images are like boats raised by the swell. Sporadically, the program selects certain sequences whose image or sound, or both, are activated for a few seconds. The randomly selected image grows; we get closer to how we classically view a film on screen, and then, just as fugitively as it appeared, the image plunges back into the forever seething magmatic field of the film. Coloured discs [the artists talk of 'colourful balls in synthetic images'] contrasting with the black-and-white film display the digital touch that will mark [index] this or that sequence and give it an individual and intermittent life, realizing for a short time a sort of *petite fête locale*. It may

be recalled that this is how Jean-Paul Sartre described Calder's 'mobiles' - as 'little local festivals'. Calder's intention was to animate Mondrian's workshop which he had visited in 1930; SLIDERS_Lab turned Hitchcock's film into a 'digital mobile'. In addition, just as the mobile always returns to a state of equilibrium, having completed a loop from its static to its kinetic state before returning to the static one again, likewise the sequences materialized by *TMWKT*M's photograms escape, at regular time intervals, gravity and being splattered across space, to settle in a beautiful diagonal line in the semantic order of the normal projection of the film - probably so as not to totally discourage the fans of linear films, if these still exist! This, the complex planetarium-type machinery gives way to visions of satellites in geostationary orbit or, to keep to our artistic terms



SLIDERS_lab
[F. Curien, J.-M. Dallet], *CERN Memory*, 2011. Interactive prototype realized with Studio 2Roqs [Bordeaux, France]. Screenshot.

¹ 'Biographical Chronology', Steina and Woody Vasulka: *Machine Media*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco [Cal.], 1996. See website [French version]: <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/f/collection/vasulka/archives/chrono.html> [consulted Nov. 2108]

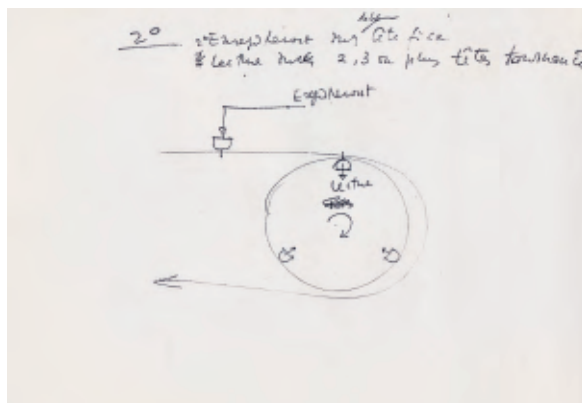
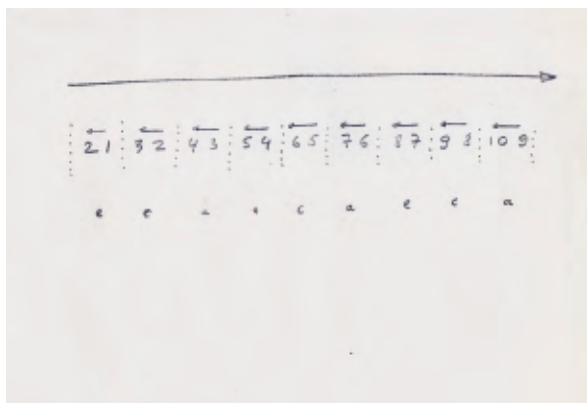
of reference, to Malevich-style Suprematist works of art.

In the Maison de l'Amérique latine exhibition, the work of Sliders_Lab was in dialogue with a work by Masaki Fujihata entitled *Morel's Panorama* [2003], which was placed in a room at the other end of the grand hall of what was once the house of the psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot, of the Salpêtrière - to whom Sigmund Freud paid a special visit - and his son Jean-Baptiste Charcot, the explorer of the polar seas. By reactivating in the digital age - that is to say, with a camera rotating on a foot placed in the room - the painted panoramas which had a huge public success in the 19th century, Fujihata spatializes the image in the same way as Sliders_Lab would do a few years later. Two bands of circular images are projected onto the back wall of the room and, like the internal and external faces of a Moebius strip or a Max Bill sculpture that are not easily distinguished from one another, articulate the image of the artist walking around reading Bioy Casares's book in Japanese; these images were prerecorded in the room and projected offline, whereas the image of the audience present in the room is recorded this time in real time. During the joint dance of the two tapes [the oldest one combining sound and image, the most contemporary one projecting only the image, the sound being emitted and heard live by the spectator-actors testing out the work], the computer organizes the projection in such a way that the spectator has the impression of finding themselves successively and sometimes simultaneously in front of a mirror, an anamorphic device, in the centre of a circular painted panorama and in front of [or surrounded by] a camera. He understands that the computer program and the video projector are replaying the formats of the optical machines of the past in the history of art and penetrates retrospectively into the mental universes associated with them.

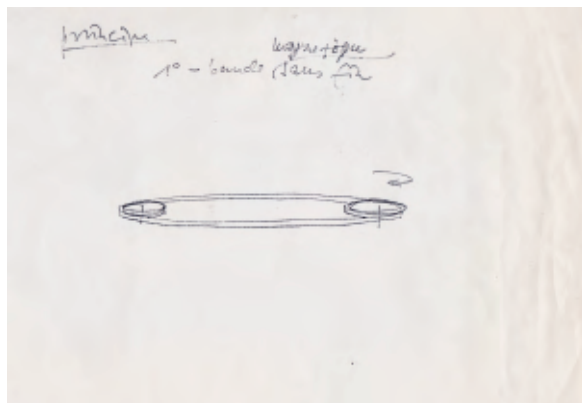
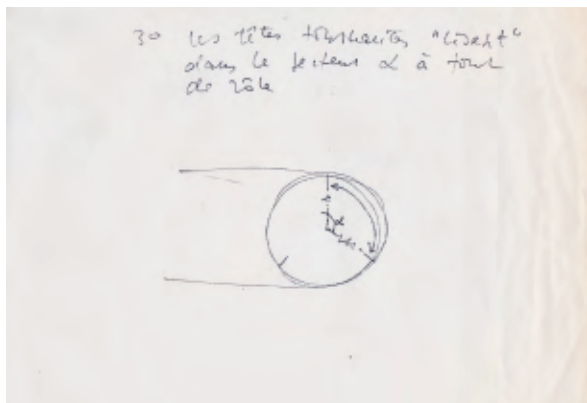
A common point between SLIDERS_lab and Fujihata is that both put the history of the recording of the world and its artistic rendition in a historical perspective, taking the term 'perspec-

tive' in all its meanings, from the most spatial to the most symbolic one. Another common point is their measured use of [endogenous] interactivity, even as they promote immersion and haptic apprehension of the image. Even if we can play in front of the camera in *Morel's Panorama* and slide a finger into a hole made in the support of its digital tablet version - this finger will intervene as a live, disruptive element in the pre-recorded loop - it is not the less true that it is the program alone that manipulates the image. In *TMWKT* likewise, even if the image comes close to almost touching the spectator and therefore appears to address them in an individualized way, and even if the sound also reaches his or her ear in the form of a particular phrase, dialogue, or piece of music, disengaged from the soundtrack of the film as a whole, the real indexing and the real interaction occur between the film and the program that deliniarizes it.

I had invited SLIDERS_lab to take part in the 'Invention de Morel' exhibition because, the preceding year, I had visited the 'The Flux and Reflux of the Signal. Steina and Woody Vasulka & SLIDERS_lab' exhibition, at Le Cube digital art centre in Issy-les-Moulineaux, in the autumn of 2016. I discovered *Digital Vocabulary* and *Memory Mirror*, two installations realized by SLIDERS_lab in collaboration with Steina and Woody Vasulka. On 17 November 2016 the Vasulkas were also the guests of honour of the 'Machine Vision. Around Steina and Woody Vasulka' symposium at the National Institute of Art History [INHA], where I work. I saw them for the first time and was struck by the strength of their work, which at that time was still practically unknown to me.¹ Jean-Marie Dallet and Frédéric Curien share with the Vasulkas, whom they admire, a taste for digital memory architectures, archives, and vision machines. The symposium was an opportunity to go back in time to the 1970s, when, as founders of The Kitchen in New York City, the Vasulkas began experimenting with devices [modulators, video synthesizers, keyers, sequencers] that allowed them to isolate the elements of a vocabulary and to put together a montage syntax specific



Piotr Kowalski, diagrams of the operating principles of the *Time Machines* [undated].



to the electronic image. *Golden Voyage* [1973], for example, is an electronic tribute to Magritte which is quite representative of the work made using the keyer. In the Vasulkas' works, the images are always embedded in media forms that have their own life. We think of Magritte's series *Fenêtres* where the landscape appears in the shards of glass on the floor, as if it had been painted on the broken glass without having reality [in Francis Bacon's painting, we also have second images appearing on unusual shapes or walls inserted in the frame of the image].

Between 1975 and 1977 Steina developed the *Machine Vision* series, and, being a virtuoso violinist passionate about sound, designed feedback devices to make the sound wave affect the video signal and vice versa [sound/image interface]. Between 1976 and 1980 Woody Vasulka and

Jeffrey Schier built the Vasulka Imaging System or Digital Image Articulator, a prototype for generating algorithm-based images and converting them into analogue signals. Steina, meanwhile, she created a series of multi-screen video installations that have as their visual material elements of the landscapes of New Mexico and Iceland, her native country. In a way, the duo of the Vasulkas is mirrored by the duo of SLIDERS_lab: a musician and a plastic artist, each of whom can perfectly understand the other in their field.

While the Vasulkas have had practices similar to those of other pioneers of electronic and digital art such as Nam June Paik, Piotr Kowalski - for whom Jean-Marie Dallet worked as an assistant [we will return to that] - Volf Vostell and Peter Weibel - whom I knew personally, or through their works and through books, especially those of Frank Popper - one

practice is all their own: the work on databases [big data] and their spatial visualization, the architecture of memory. That is why they are an important milestone in understanding SLIDERS_lab's work.

Art of Memory [1987] by Woody Vasulka dates from the same year as the Wim Wenders film *Der Himmel über Berlin* ['The Sky above Berlin'; English title: *Wings of Desire*]. Both works refer to the Second World War, as well as to the figure of the Angel, who is perhaps the Angel of History of which Walter Benjamin spoke, who moves at full speed, but with his head turned not forwards, that is, to the future, towards which he rushes with utter unconsciousness, but backwards, to the past. Vasulka has said that he was referring to the Angel of Gustave Doré, the landscape-dominating Angel, a figure found in his illustrations

for the Bible or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The Angel of Wenders is a winged goddess of Victory placed on top of a monumental column at the Gedächtniskirche in Berlin, the Church of Remembrance, still in the state of semi-destruction that it was left in at the end of the war, for which reason it is colloquially called the 'hollow tooth' by Berliners. Woody Vasulka appears to be placed on a cliff above the Pacific Ocean or at the edge of a New Mexico canyon, like Mephistopheles tempting Faust in Goethe's play - we might also think of the Black Angel of German Romanticism, of the Baroque 'Angel of the bizarre', of *Lucifer* painted by Franz von Stuck in 1890. Wenders's Angel abandons the dream of immortality to become simply human, a mortal lover of a mortal, a circus trapeze artiste. In Vasulka's work, a man throws stones

Piotr Kowalski,
Time Machine, interactive installation.
Exhibition 'Time Machine + projets',
Centre Pompidou,
Paris, 1981.



at the Angel before feverishly taking a photograph of him, as if to keep as a testimony and as a denunciation of the crimes of history. And, indeed, in *Art of Memory*, it is the complete memory of the 20th century that is conjured up in archival images and films: the artist, of Czech origin, remembers his childhood in a country annexed by the Nazis and mobilized by the propaganda put out by Goebbels's film and newsreel company, the UFA. Archival films of the battles of Pearl Harbor, the Pacific, Stalingrad or the Spanish Civil War parade through monumental virtual architectures - evolving support forms - which themselves are virtually placed in the reworked images of the landscapes of New Mexico. The shapes and titles slide diagonally across the screen, as in Suprematist artworks - and, what is more, in the film we see Malevich's *Eight Red Rectangles* [1915]. The image appears to be torn in pieces, following reverb effects on the ground, in spontaneous elongations. As Vasulka likes to say, the *output* [the image] and the *input* [the program] are curled up round each other: the algorithms seem transparent and are revealed by the movements of the images following their command.

The critique of the medium and the quasi-didactic aspect found in the work of the Vasulkas, especially Woody's, were at the heart of the work of another artist fundamental to an understanding of SLIDERS_lab's artistic logic: the mathematician Piotr Kowalski [1927-2004] who, after having worked alongside scientists at MIT, defined himself as an artist-researcher producing 'art tools'. When I met Jean-Marie Dallet for the first time and saw the *Topomovies* [2009-2010], the fruits of the first interactive cinema experiments of the collective formed in 2005, Kowalski had unfortunately already died [in 2004], but I knew that Dallet had been his assistant and had even prepared some of the documentation I was using for my research

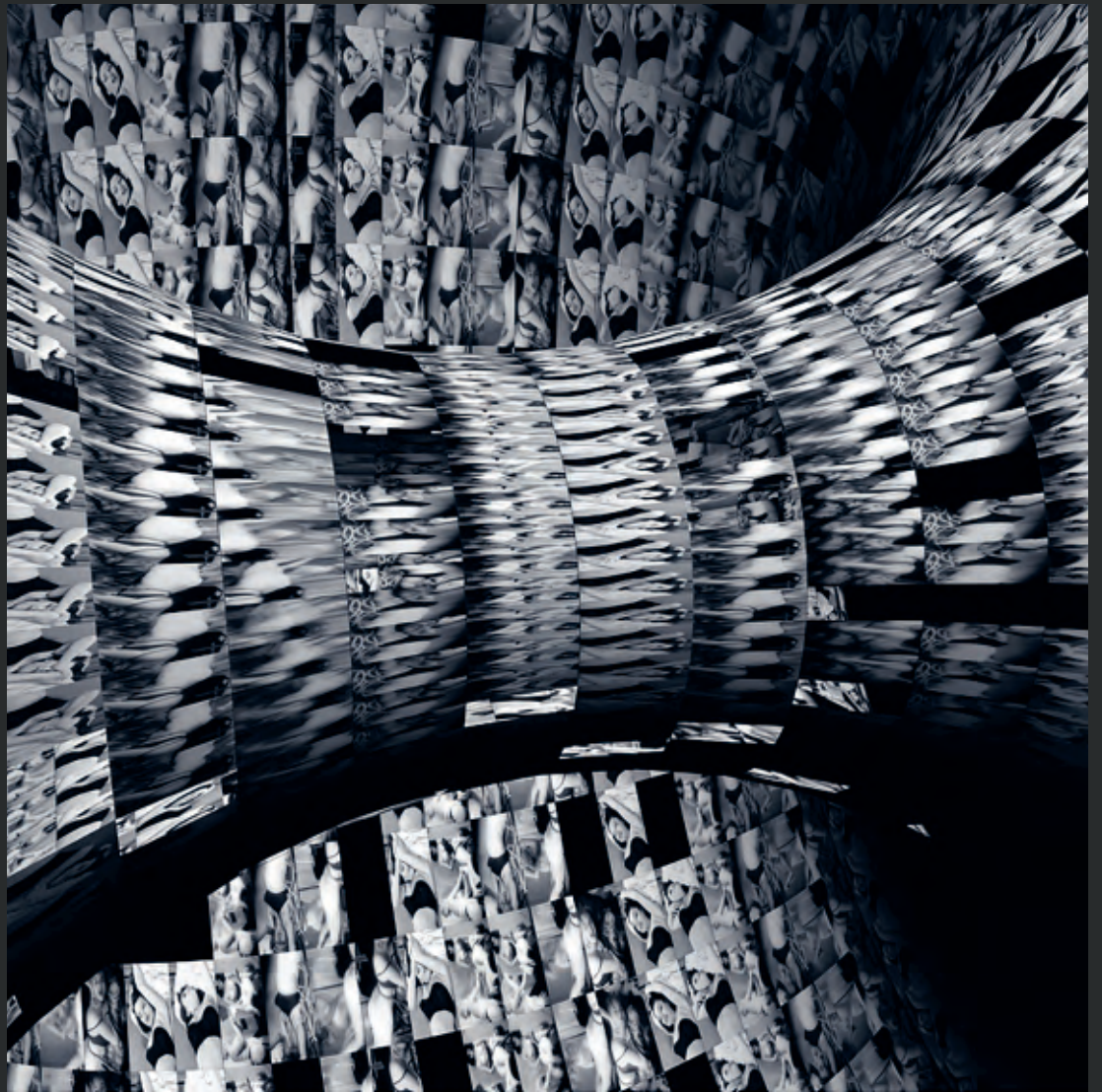
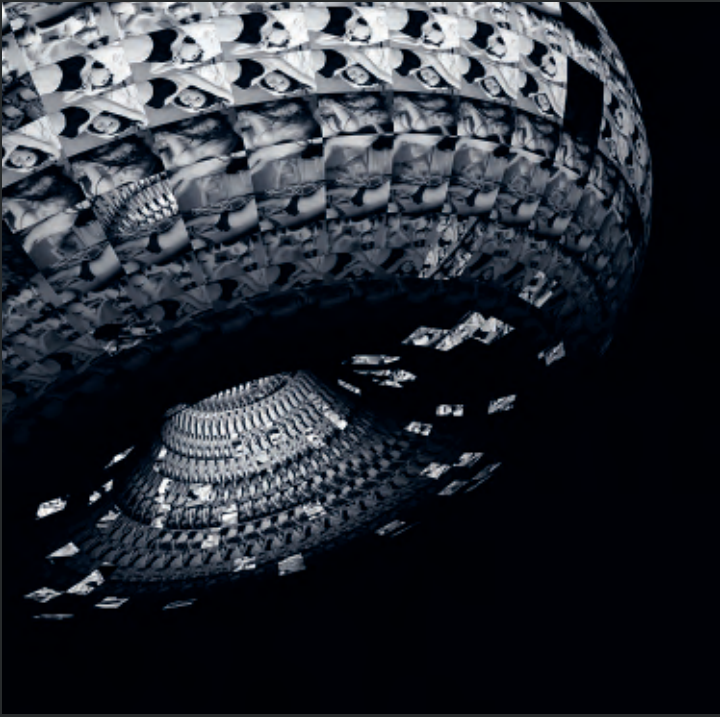
into his work, and as well as that later used by the doctoral student who, under my supervision, put together the catalogue raisonné of Piotr Kowalski's work.² We often talk about him, even today.

For the artists of SLIDERS_lab, two works by Kowalski are particularly important: *Time Machine* [1979-80] and *La Flèche du temps* [The Arrow of Time; 1990-92]. The first one uses what at the time was a cutting-edge computer program to deal in real time with images and sounds captured by cameras and microphones connected to the computer. The captured fragment is immediately broadcast by reversing the scrolling of the images and the pronunciation of the sentences, so quickly that the normal version and the backward version seem to coincide. This work, which Borges and Bioy Casares would have liked very much if they had been acquainted with it, had the originality of taking the time that flows, in other words direct time, as an artistic material to be manipulated. The artist becomes a sculptor of time. *Time Machine* echoes a never realized sculptural project by Alberto Giacometti, but which he designed and whose mechanism he described in his text 'Le Rêve, le Sphinx et la mort de T.' [The Dream, the Sphinx and the Death of T.] published in 1946 in the magazine *Labyrinthe*: 'Suddenly I had the feeling that all the events existed at the same time around me. Time became horizontal and circular, was space at the same time, and I tried to draw it.'³ The drawings show a disc where the events of the artist's life are represented by upright boards positioned at varying distances from the centre, connected to it by lines. The idea of spatializing time and registering it on a disc anticipated the operation of a computer disk where events are made present at any time and are semantically connected.

La Flèche du temps [1990-92] is an interactive digital video installation composed of eighteen screens arranged

² Oriane Villatte, *Piotr Kowalski (1927-2004): L'artiste chercheur et ses outils d'art*, PhD thesis, Paris Nanterre, 2013. See the exhibition catalogue *Piotr Kowalski*, Musée national d'art moderne du Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1981-2, and the film *Deux temps, trois mouvements* [1982] by Gisèle and Luc Meichler.
³ Alberto Giacometti, 'Le Rêve, le Sphinx et la mort de T.', *Labyrinthe*, Nos. 22-5 [Dec. 1946], p. 13.

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[F. Curien, J.-M. Dallet], *Topomovies*, *Tores no 4, Ensemble no 1*, 2009. Set of three photographs laminated on Dibond 2 mm, 340 × 100 cm.



next to one other, in a single line. Kowalski says of this work, which he considers to be the 'sequel to *Time Machine*': 'The device takes the video images as they come, in their continuity, memorizes them, processes them and sends them again out one by one, all this in real time. The images come from the left, advance like a caterpillar, and disappear at the right. An automatic program scrolls through the machine's various possibilities and produces a series of interventions: it distributes the images, stops them, freezes them, zooms in on an image or zooms out on the whole, does a digital zoom that leads to an unrecognizable image. I didn't want any pre-recorded images. The visitor therefore has the choice between two sources: television, as it comes, tuned in to whatever live channel, with a small witness screen, or a camera that captures the visitor themselves. The audience make their own

television, on a small stage bound by a circle of light.'

The *Chronophotomaton* [2010-11] is a device designed by SLIDERS_lab based on the principle of the chronophotography device developed by Étienne-Jules Marey: the walker moves physically about the stage and then uses the computer to move their image as recorded by the camera within an enlarged spatiality compared to the initial device. The discrete cutting, frame by frame, allows you to manipulate units and, as in the 'arts of memory', to store them in virtual containers and to open them up at will. The Kowalskian 'pseudo-didactic' aspect and critique of the media are part of the experience.

Compared to their predecessors - I do not have enough time or space to talk about other artists who have influenced SLIDERS_lab such as Jean-Louis Boissier, whose seminal work *Le Bus* presented in



SLIDERS_lab, *MIM*
[*Marey Interactif*
Multimédia], 2010-11.
Programming: Studio
2Roqs; Realisation
of the cabinet:
Atelier W110.

⁴ Christian Metz, *Essais sur la signification au cinéma*, Klincksieck, Paris, 1983, p. 53.

the exhibition 'Les Immatériaux' by Jean-François Lyotard and Thierry Chaput at the Pompidou Centre [1985] is a key piece in the development of inter-activity [of which Boissier has also proposed the history and the theory], or George Legrady, a formidable visual artist of databases and a fascinating organizer of information flows - Dallet and Curien, nourished by film, experimentation, and video, have followed, it seems to me, two main tracks. Belonging to the generation of sampling musicians, practitioners of gliding in all its forms, of skateboarding and surfing, street artists whose rapid marks fashion the walls of images found in our cities, they have made 'action

Piotr Kowalski [left] with William Burroughs looking at the *Time Machine*, in 1979, at the gallery Ronald Feldman in New York.



moving', as they call it, their trademark, travelling in and with images. But, being visual artists in love with the shared social form, they have, with the same conviction, developed an extensive form of sculpture, which goes from the video-digital installation with its immersive aspects, to memory-based mobile sculptures, two complementary types of presence *through* and *in* space.

Jean-Marie Dallet likes to quote Serge Daney saying that an image is not alone but refers to any other image. Christian Metz did not think otherwise: 'Moving from one image to two images is moving from image to language.' The visual artist John Baldassari had also noted: 'As soon as you put two things together, you get a story.'⁴ This great explorer of 'betweenness' was aware that two images brought together form what I would call a 'historical landscape' [an updating of the composed landscape of classical painting into the digital age] full of nuances and impossible to specify, as shown in a title like *Somewhere Between Almost Right and Not Quite [With Orange]*.

The *Sky Memory Project* [2011-12], reminiscent of a 'Space Odyssey' - any reference to Stanley Kubrick is obviously not fortuitous! - [dis]arranges, in a real spatial navigation, planets composed of sets of sequences and sounds from the first six James Bond films. The collective explains that 'The cinematographic sequences are described by words and the editing takes place according to semantic criteria, either automatically or because of the action of the performer on the game interface, today iPad touch tablets.' 'The open computer machine', as they call it, allows three 'performers' to mount in real time 'a new type of film using visual and sound elements stored in a database'. This interactive cinema creates a film 'in which a new track, that of code, of programming, would have been added to the image track and soundtrack'. One of the characteristics of this new type of film is that it is programmable,

'configurable' or even infinitely mouldable. Is this not the realization of what Bioy Casares imagined as the 'machine of Morel' and of what Alain Resnais imagined as the film 'of which one would not know what was the first reel', sketched out in *Last Year at Marienbad* [1961]? Lev Manovich would talk about a hyper-film: 'a N+1 film'. Bill Viola foresaw it as early as 1988: 'mounting' will become 'writing a software program' that tells the computer how to dispose [i.e. rotate, cut, disperse, erase] the information on the disk, broadcast it in the specified order in real time or allow the spectator to intervene.'⁵ Hence the experiential images that come to us: images of flying carpets, shimmers, the kaleidoscope, the hall of mirrors in *The Lady from Shanghai*. We may also think of 'The Book of Sand' by Jorge Luis Borges which has neither a beginning nor an end and whose words and images are never found on the same page, and which, at the end, the narrator leaves on a staircase shelf on Calle Mexico, at the National Library of Buenos Aires, of which he was once director. It is probably still there, though I didn't find it!

All these metaphors naturally refer to space, to the natural landscape or something built, to mathematical form or architecture. SLIDERS_lab hybridizes the figures: 'Our virtual models are sometimes ancient, like the plan, the wheel, the tower, but these narrative figures can also be more abstract forms like tori, diabolos, Dupin cyclides, helixes.' But they also hybridize the traditions of the arts of memory [*Ars memoriae* and drawings in the *Ars brevis* by Raymond Llull showing the famous

Ars combinatoria], kineticism [their towers of hypnotic images somewhat resemble Brion Gysin's Dreamachine], and fantasy literature [from the Tower of Babel to the Infinite Library of Borges, via Piranesi], or even cartography and geology [indeed, Jean-Marie Dallet studied geology [faulted images, canyons of images, disturbed deposits, mines at simulated depth, etc.]].

Because it navigates in the information layer that duplicates reality, SLIDERS needs to geolocate in interactive spaces in 3D and to create what the collective calls 'locating structures'. They make it possible for data sets that have 'a family resemblance' to crystallize and to make them happen. Sometimes these locating structures [such as the Interactive Tower at CERN of 2012 that artists compare to a virtual Trajan Column] are embodied in real sculpture-consultation desks. The MIM [Marey Interactive Multimedia], an interactive piece of furniture, created in 2011 for the Musée Marey in Beaune, France, or the recent furniture for the Vasulka archives which has just been presented in the hall of the Institut national d'histoire de l'art in September 2018, a neat plywood furniture made by a cabinetmaker, and which develops all the semantic and metaphorical qualities found in the sculptural design of Ettore Sottsass Jr. Again, when seeing it in action, I thought of the sculpture imagined by Giacometti that, after the war, André Breton wanted to have realized. The artist declined. He would undoubtedly have looked with great interest today at the 'digitally operated objects' of SLIDERS_lab.

⁵ Bill Viola, 'Y a-t-il co-propriété dans l'espace des données', *Communication*, No. 48, EHESS/Seuil, Paris, 1988, p. 68.

SLIDERS_lab
[F. Curien, J.-M. Dallet], *Topomovies, Babel's Tower no 1*, 2009. Photography laminated on Dibond 2 mm, 100 × 100 cm.

