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Cover
Riccardo Giacconi, *Diteggiatura (Fingerpicking)* (2021), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Installation view of Charles Atlas: *The Mathematics of Consciousness* at Pioneer Works, September 9 - November 22, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo by Dan Bradica.

Front Page
Philipp Fleischmann, *Film Sculpture (3)* (2022), installation view, Lyon Biennale Lugdunam. Courtesy the artist.

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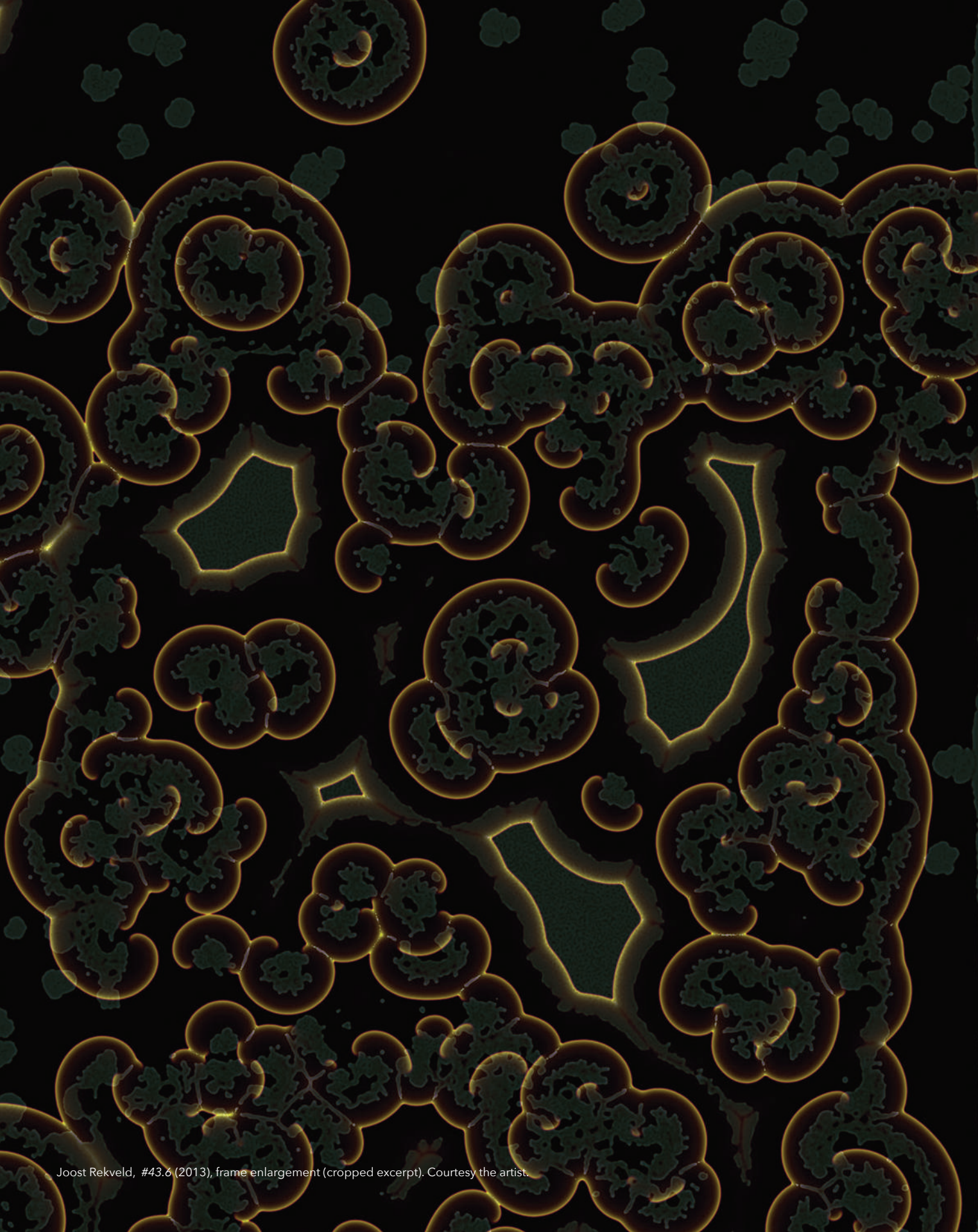
CIRCUIT-BENDING PSYCHEDELIC TRANSCENDENTALISM

#43 by Joost Rekveld &
Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc
by Jacques Perconte

MEGAN PHIPPS

Circuit-bending is a practice of modifying the workings of electronic devices, synthesizers, instruments, and visual technologies. Artists who circuit-bend moving images tend to expose the unexamined technical functions embedded within them. In *Expanded Cinema* (1970), Gene Youngblood describes these practices as giving rise to a "cosmic consciousness," which reaches well beyond common sense and its spatio-temporal parameters. Youngblood suggests the emergence of a kind of mysticism, what I call "psychedelic transcendentalism"—a bending of moving image technologies with an eye to nature, to religious association, to ritual practice, and to the growing use of psychoactive substances. Joost Rekveld and Jacques Perconte are two contemporary filmmakers whose work can be understood within the circuit-bending lineage, with profound implications for cinema and ecological discourse.

JOOST REKVELD: #43.6 (2013)

Rekveld is a Brussels-based experimental filmmaker who examines the relationship between computation and biological and physiological systems. He constructs abstract images through light installations and live multimedia projections, using circuit-bending machines such as vector hardware and algorithmic software. His start in filmmaking, with *IFSfilm* (1991), was entirely code-based, using Forth and Assembler

programming languages. He then began using super-8 celluloid contact-printing, and subsequently gravitated again toward code, experimenting with software circuit-bending in Max-MSP-Jitter, and later via Python and GLSL shaders on Linux machines. This software-based approach is manifest in his series *#43* (2013). Rekveld explains:

> The images in film *#43* are generated by systems in which the pixels are agents that are, in some respects, comparable to cells in an organism. These systems are bumped into motion by disruptions that cause a difference between some pixels and their neighbors. Such an edge of difference becomes the seed for processes of decay and growth, an imbalance that embodies a store of energy for the system as a whole, similar to an electrical potential. Under some circumstances the cells in the system feed each other so that oscillations or other kinds of order are produced spontaneously, sometimes stable in themselves, sometimes feeding on noise to stay active.

The journey leading to the #43 series came from Rekveld's research in cybernetics, neuronal behavior, and structures of neural networks. But, as Rekveld explains, "most neural networks

Joost Rekveld, #43.6 (2013), frame enlargement (cropped excerpt). Courtesy the artist.

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that one reads about in scientific papers are very small compared to the number of pixels in a decent image." He instead used a detailed description for how neurons behave—the FitzHugh-Nagumo model, which "shows how nerve impulses propagate" when used in an assemblage of connected units. The aesthetic manifestation of this conceptual approach can be found in Rekveld's elegant *#43.6* (2013), an eleven-minute short, and *Vertical Cinema* (35mm vertical scope), which was originally commissioned by Sonic Acts. He describes *#43.6* as "parameters determining the interactions between pixels and an initial disruption," which produces an "image that starts the processes of evolution."

In turn, Rekveld creates universes which enable artificial life to grow outside of his control. He calls this process of reciprocal transformation a dialog with machines: "the process of mutual co-construction of media artists and their tools and artistic languages." Questions that emerge from the process include: How much agency does the machine have in these dialogic processes? Is the outcome of the moving image driven by the instrument or the instrumentalist? Is the machine, like natural organic systems, autonomous? In what ways do complexity and chaos theory affect or alter the agency of the circuitry and/or the mathematical equation? How much agency do humans then have over these mathematical equations? In a world with more media-saturated than ever before, how does the material and immaterial cohabitation of the human and nonhuman assemblage alter the contemporary technological environment?

One significant variable included in this line of questioning concerns the implementation of mathematics in the form of algorithms. Algorithms have extended their network edges and embedded themselves into nearly all forms of contemporary human experience—the way we work, the way we perceive who and where we are. Philosophical questions initially derived from cybernetics mutate simple examinations of elemental media (e.g., evolved electrical circuitry, cathode ray-tube televisions and computer monitors) towards examinations of individuality and human and non-human relationships. Today it is common to question what networks you are and are not a part of, what information sources and narrative structures attend your experiences. An examination of psychedelics and media technologies can serve as a relevant and useful frameworks for attempting to grasp the malleable consciousnesses of a contemporary algorithmic society. This can perhaps be visually illustrated in the form of digital fractals, which Rekveld describes as "mathematical objects" not under human control.

The artificial representation of fractals emerged in the 1980s with computers' capacity for iterative processes. However, it's also known that these patterns are found within nature (the Fibonacci spiral or the golden spiral),whether in forests, aquatic and river delta ecosystems, in the growth of plants (cactuses, flowers), the shape of galaxies, and in lightning patterns and Lichtenberg figures. Fractals, essentially, show how mathematics works, how nature works, and to some extent, how psychedelics work, in other words. (Rekveld conceptualizes this process by invoking mathematicians' tendency to compare their discoveries to the experience of walking in a natural landscape that already exists.) So, if fractals exist in nature's living material ecosystems, and even within the natural patterns imposed by lightning and electricity, then why is the algorithm not viewed as part of nature?

Circuit-bending software, as opposed to hardware, can bring attention to the intangibility of the algorithmic black box that has become a predominant and relevant topic in new media and public discourse today. Insights obtained throughout these cybernetic styles of psychedelic transcendentalism can actually demarcate social consensus regarding empirical reality. They also offer alternative frameworks towards current attempts at grasping (possible) psychological and socio-cultural implications of the (perceived) shift from a concrete space-time into a digital artifice. In other words, contemporary culture is wrapped up in processing a mass unraveling of consensual reality, and cybernetic explorations may then be able to provide a tool for understanding this process.
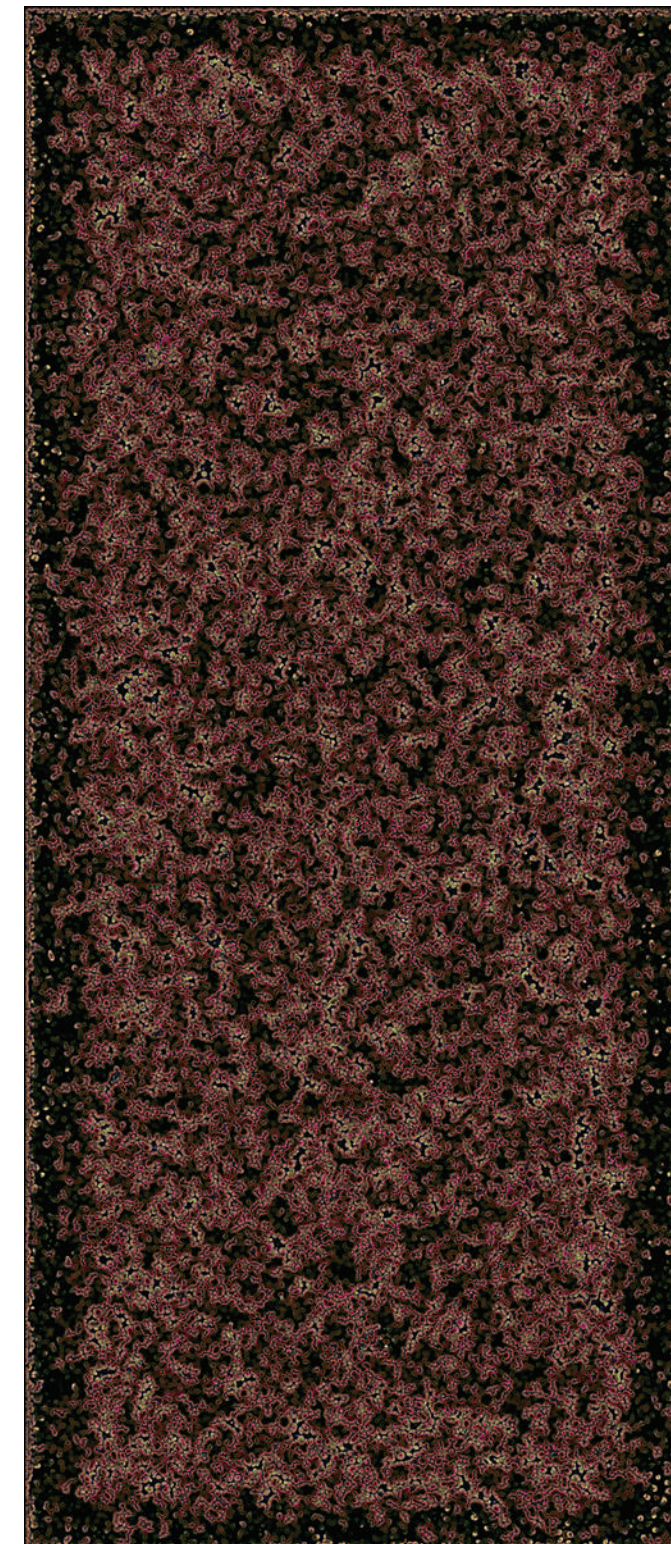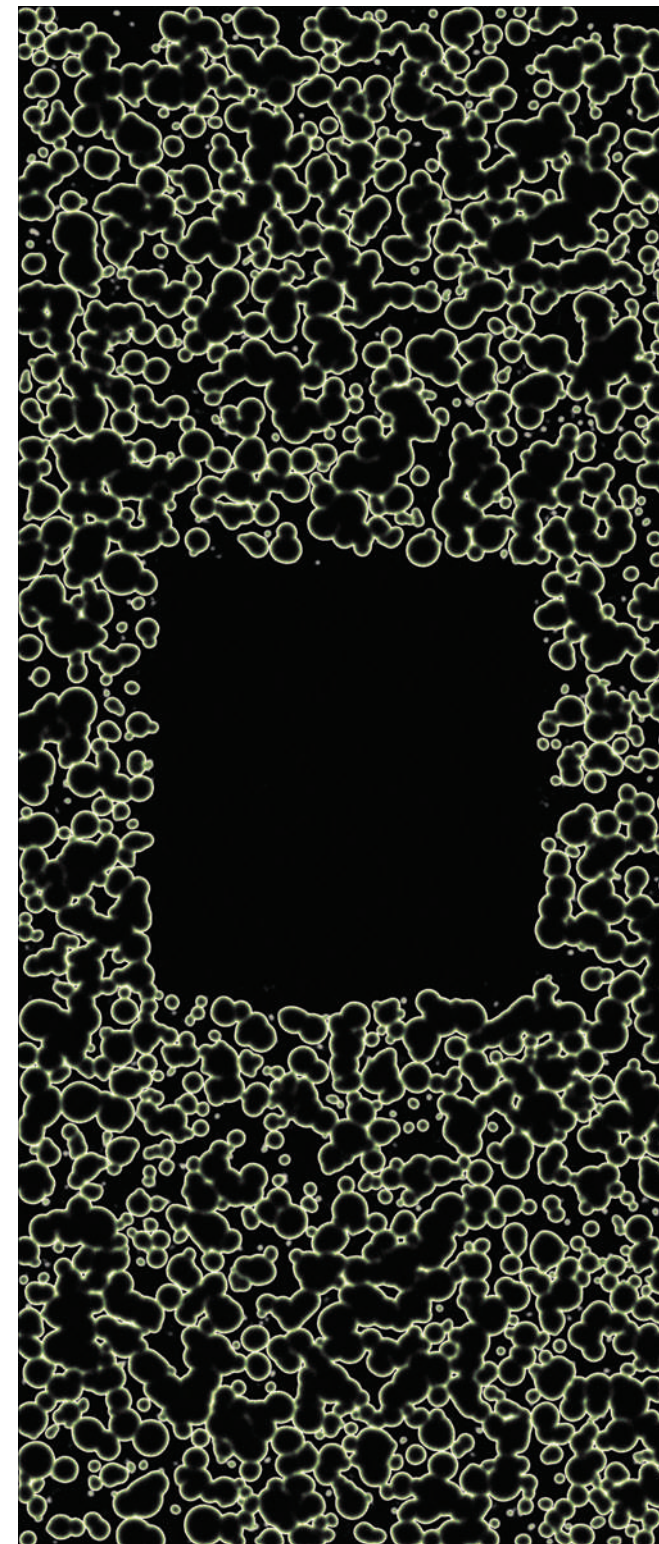
Joost Rekveld, *#43.6* (2013), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.
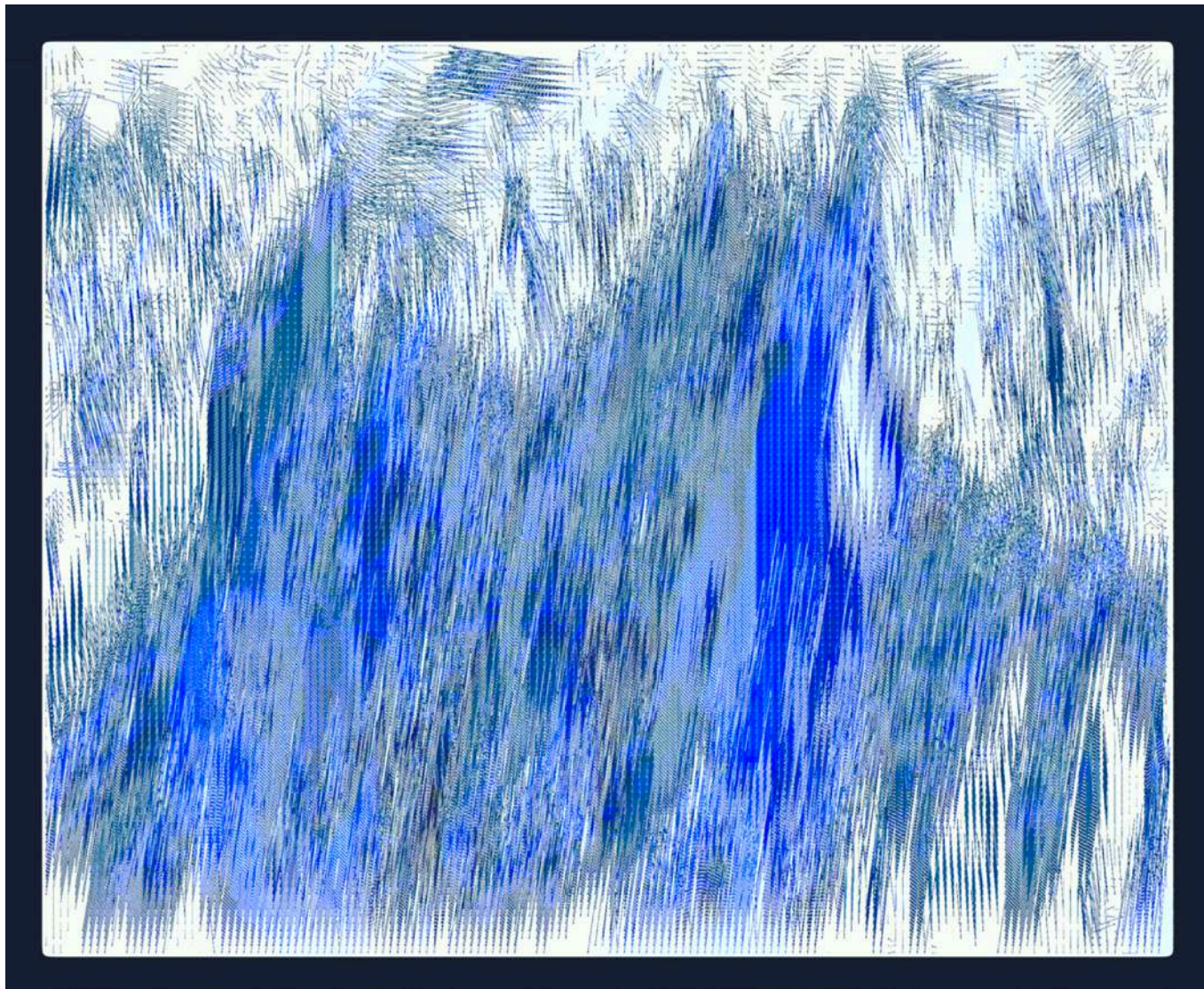
Jacques Perconte, *Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc* (2021), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

JACQUES PERCONTE: *AVANT L'EFFONDREMENT DU MONT BLANC* (2021)

The blurred boundaries between the natural and the artificial finds further illumination in the works by filmmaker and media artist Jacques Perconte. Through an attraction towards light as an elemental medium, and drawing from his formal training in painting, Perconte's moving-image model finds its basis in the synthesis of four of the main visual elements: motion, texture, form, and color. Perconte distorts the notion of a pixel through a visual bleeding of its movement into and within a perceptual representation of the natural landscape. Perconte does not outline his technical approach to the bending of the video compression. It's not that he wishes to keep a sort of mysticism intact, Perconte's approach relies on a two-fold conception of processual phenomena—natural and technological. This approach is most prominent in Perconte's sixteen-minute-long *Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc (Before the Collapse of Mont Blanc)* (2021). The experimental film sheds light upon the Earth's rising temperatures, the rapid melting of glaciers, and ponders the possibility of whether we may be the last generation to see Mont Blanc's summit.

Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc begins with the black and white daguerreotype *Aiguilles, Chamonix (Le Grépon, Aiguille de Blaitè, Aiguilles du Plan)* (1854) by John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley. Imagery of the Aiguilles and the Alps begins to merge and blend with illustrations of a free-flowing cascade of data followed by woven textile maps of the geographical surrounding areas. Through this juxtaposition, the free-flowing data and white noised avalanches spliced with human-sewn depictions of space and geo-graphical environments, viewers are immediately confronted with the existing contrasts taking place between the artificial and natural. Affiliation and affinity for natural landscapes has been a constant motif and method throughout the span of Perconte's (artistic) life. Perconte was born near Grenoble and the mountains situated themselves as a strong presence in his heart.

Early in his artistic career, Perconte began inspecting the aesthetic parameters of the materiality of the image. He explains that he was "really looking for this 'présence' of the technicality of the image inside the image." After using the natural form of the human body as his primary subject matter, he came to realize the landscape was his destined collaborator. Relationships with natural locations, whether fleeting or long-term, became a vital part of Perconte's artistic practice and lifestyle. His long-term relationships with on-site locations started with a visit to Normandy in 2008. After this visit, he felt the desire to return to the location and, each time in doing so, he felt that he was also (re-)learning how to film. Rather than looking for the perfect image, Perconte aimed toward finding the spirit of the location and connecting to the mood of the place. Essentially, he was learning how to not force an image by thinking-out the filming process, instead feeling it viscerally, instinctually, intrinsically. Thus, by revisiting the on-site locations he became committed to reconnecting both ontologically (i.e., to the location) and epistemologically (i.e., to Perconte's own filming process).

Perconte films in such a way as to let the actions of natural lifeforms take their course throughout the composition of fixed shots, finding the right spot to place the camera in the landscape and allowing it to remain there. Perconte hones his filmic intuition and then draws from the imaged and imagined landscape, a new set of resources that function as reconfigurations and conceptions of space. Perconte explains the two-fold nature of this process:

> The time of shooting is completely separated from the time in my studio to work on the image, it's really two dimensions and they are not connected. Because when I film, I don't think about what I want to do with the image. I really try to be completely in my situation, it's really a kind of spirituality to do with the filming.

This filming technique is thus brought anew, in equal measure, to his video compression and editing techniques. Viewing the filmed content essentially for the first time, he seeks the right formula of video compression techniques, which are performed by an algorithm, in order to attain a delicate balance of textual, sensual, and sensorial effects. The result could be considered as a sort of kinetic painting if it were not for the fact that these are filmed images, existing in front of the camera in real time. As Perconte's work also derives from actual filming of landscapes (e.g., Mont Blanc), and takes its final form as a unique sort of kinetic painting, it results in a further experience of color that stimulates and propagates deeper levels of the conscious mind. The pixelated fragmentation produces a kind of trance as sound and image enunciate a machinic assemblage of pure image and reality.
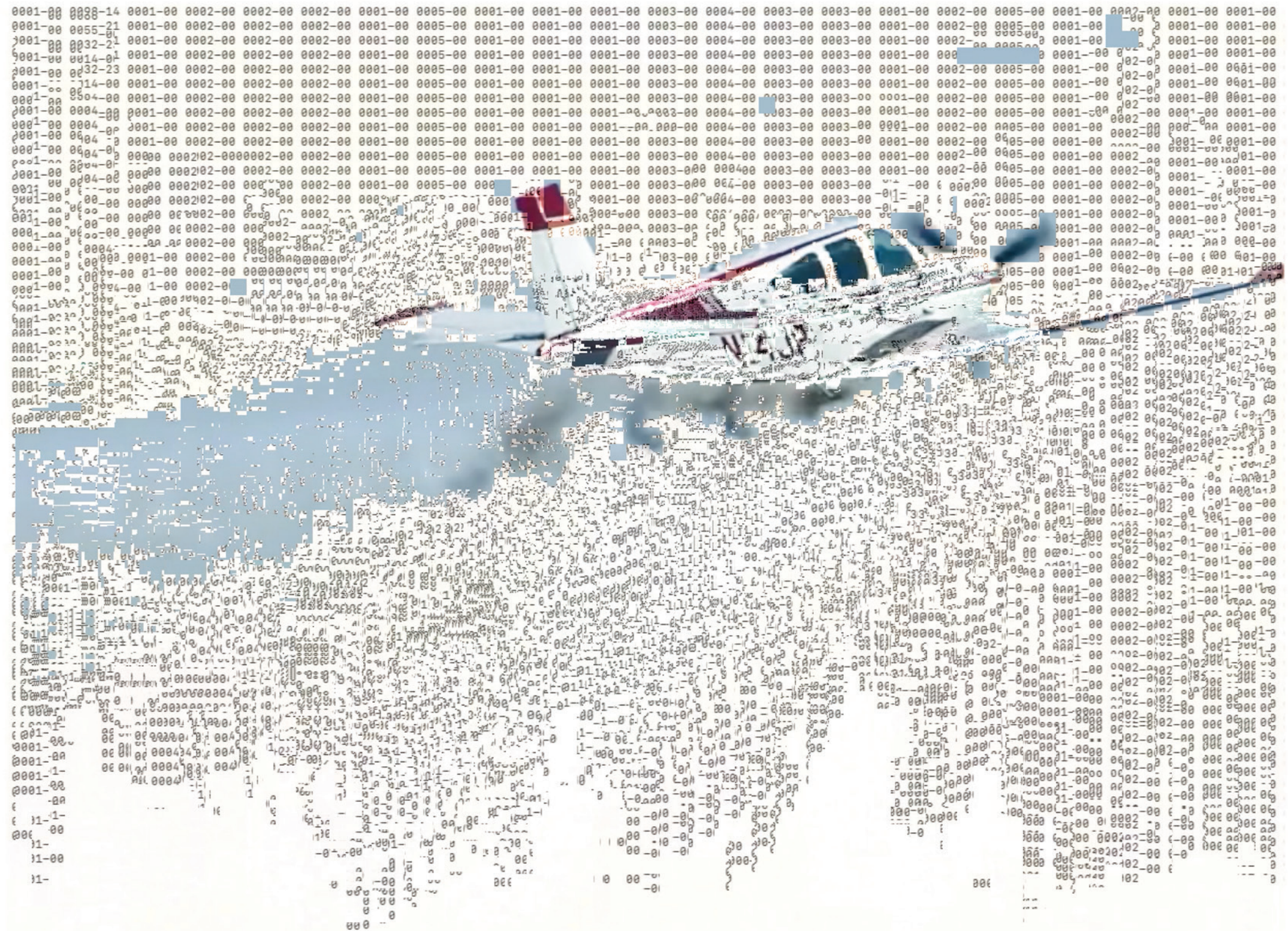
Through this aesthetic, Perconte's work brings an additional layer of conceptual and practical awareness to the movement in nature (e.g., water) and the inherent aesthetic qualities of movement itself, made legible through visual digital technologies. By not adhering to an aesthetic hierarchy of demarcated lines and
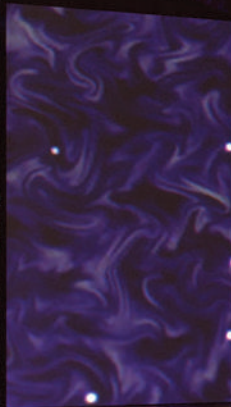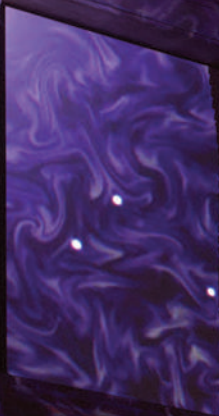
objects, the work blurs natural and artificial objects, artifacts, and materiality. However, what makes Perconte's work unique is not only the blurring of the organic-mechanic and the blurring of the Small (e.g., fragmentation, pixelation) and the Large (e.g., nature, the landscape) to designate a materiality of the image, but its apprehending qualities and powers in the movement of things that are historically and geographically determinable as a milieu (i.e., the possible collapse of Mont Blanc). By way of this pictorial event, where lines of light condition the geometric digital image, what results is that 'mind matters' and what we see is materially dependent upon our environment.

Perconte's focus on aspects that light acquires when it encounters an object allows for a detachment in what is conceived as 'the object' and thus from the natural/artificial binary that comes along with this objectifying paradigm. Consequently, Perconte produces artworks that no longer represent 'objects' but rather show the inherent lines of force, agency, and movement within the natural landscape and the political dimension of humanity's influence on the velocity of that movement. He does so in visual harmony with the lines of force, energy, agency and movement of the pixel(s), and the dimension of his own (human) influence on the velocity of that movement. Perhaps from this, viewers can begin to discern that the two forms of the nonhuman (the natural and the artificial) are not as dissimilar in their levels of agency, force, and inherent qualities of movement as they are currently conceived to be.

By way of an affective style of psychedelic transcendentalism, Perconte's digital "trippy" aesthetics break open the perception of the viewer, illuminating her assumptions about movement within natural and digital environments. The viewer may transcend the boundaries between the artificial and the real, between abstract place and a specific locality. By bringing the possible "collapse" of Mont Blanc into the discussion, Perconte illustrates how consciously merging nature and technology can enrich ecological discourse. Perhaps a materialist dialogue taking place between the non-human-artificial (technology, video, pixel) and the non-human-natural (landscapes, Earthly materials, light, frequency) constitutes an essential ecological condition. What we are witnessing in Perconte's work is a circuit-bending of perception itself, creating psychedelic effects and altered states of consciousness. These considerations can induce close observation, even compassion for nonhuman systems of living.