

Stan VanDerBeek, The Colloquy of Mobiles, Pratchaya Phinthong,
Sung Tieu, Chloé Delarue/TAFAA, Dana Liljegren on Ndary Lô,
Vuth Lyno on the White Building

*Re-
purpose
and
Remake*

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By the 1970s, television had penetrated most homes in America, Europe and Japan. New forms of information circulation ushered in an age of new media that included telecommunications, telematics and cybernetic feedback. In parallel to this rapid spread, TV became a prime vector for the diffusion of violence. In *Violence Sonata* (1970), media artist and experimental film-maker Stan VanDerBeek uses TV as means by which violence impregnates the collective body to reflect on that same violence. The work, which involves video and live performance in a studio setting, intervenes in this violence that the artist described as ‘the digestive act of our inability to communicate’. ‘Man’s frustration at not being able to communicate with words leads him to violence’, said VanDerBeek. ‘Centuries of words have meant centuries of violence. We must explore all other ways to communicate if we hope to live non-violent lives.’¹ To that end, the artist appropriated and expanded TV’s material apparatus to render it a site for the articulation of a language – informational and aesthetic – beyond words.

Aired on channels 2 and 44 of Boston’s WGBH TV on 12 January 1970 from 9 to 10pm, VanDerBeek defined *Violence Sonata* as ‘TV as an “information concert”; TV as a “sensory experience”; TV as a form of “pre-fab theatre”; TV as a psycho-drama and feedback’.² Already known for his experimental animation work and as a pioneer of Expanded Cinema – a term he coined – VanDerBeek was no stranger to forays into mass media and technology, having previously collaborated with computer scientist Ken Knowlton at Bell Labs, working with his BEFLIX (‘Bell Flicks’) computer language.³ This work led to the series *Poemfield* (1966–71), bringing together experimental film, visual poetry and programming ‘conceived for use in VanDerBeek’s multi-screen installations and performances as well as for single channel projection’.⁴ The search for a new formal language through novel technologies was entwined here with the exploration of the different social forms of installations, performances and screenings. And with *Violence Sonata*, this search could be taken to the level of what the artist referred to as the ‘city’s communal nervous system’.⁵ Structured in three parts – man; man-to-man; man-to-woman – *Violence Sonata* unfolded on a TV studio set with an audience of about 300 people, 35mm film and slide projections, several TV monitors and a group of performers staging live actions (happening, drama, soap opera) in response to the real-time TV transmission. These two simultaneous live broadcasts, which included footage from newsreels, political events, sports, performances and animated collages by VanDerBeek, were processed by the artist using a range of techniques afforded by the WGBH equipment: image juxtapositions, fades, distortions and transitions that resulted in a large-scale intermedia, multisensory, multi-temporal, collage/theatre piece, all via mass communication.

The ambition behind the work was that it foster a non-violent culture, predicated on notions of audience participation and the reuse of materials, performing cybernetic feedback – the regulation, that is, of the production and circulation of information in the Boston area. The area is here conceived as a kind of ‘nervous system’ organised and regulated through retroactions. The audience could respond to the studio during the broadcast by telephone to which performers would react. In this ‘pre-fab theatre’, the video tapes, slides and films that would ‘become the sets needed for the theatre’ were also intended to be reused by other local TV channels and theatres ‘for interpretation and adaptation of the central premise’, triggering reflexivity around issues of violence.⁶

Bearing in mind the kind of techno-utopianism of much early media art, to which VanDerBeek was not immune, *Violence Sonata* was nonetheless compellingly cognisant of a context marked by the emergence of ‘real-time’ and the parallel development of a fragmented social body, as well as of telematics and networked cultures. In this regard, it is also prescient today, and offers tools that, following the artist’s own wish, can be reused, adapted and reoriented in other contexts and towards different ends. In TV VanDerBeek seemed to have seen a *pharmakon* (both poison and cure, according to Plato) for an increasingly violent society; he offered a techno-pharmacological apparatus to a public that had become atomised behind their monitors. The artist saw *Violence Sonata* as part of his concept of Expanded Cinema, or a ‘culture-intercom’, made up of audio-visual centres for the production, storage and distribution of information.⁷

In the spirit of the ‘information concert’, the works gathered here pay homage to *Violence Sonata* and exist as the result of, or engage with, repurposing, reuse, recombination or re-creation in the face of the changing futurity that stems from the current crisis. As VanDerBeek concluded in a long-ago project proposal: ‘THE FUTURE IS NOT WHAT IS USED TO BE.’⁸ Proceeding through montage, free but concrete associations, and heterological connections, this constellation of meta-stabilising objects adopt the logic of the remainder, the non-original, questioning *how* the future is not what it used to be.

In his recent essay ‘One Hundred Years of Crisis’, Yuk Hui makes the claim that an optimistic politics is grounded in concrete processes (of solidarity, of technical objects). With regards to the current crisis – immunological in its nature – the philosopher writes that a ‘True co-immunity’ needs to be articulated that ‘is not abstract solidarity, but rather departs from a concrete solidarity whose co-immunity should ground the next wave of globalization (if there is one)’.⁹ Unlike the abstract imagination of the Futurists on the one hand, and the ‘cancellation of the future’ by neoliberalism discussed by theorists Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi and Mark Fisher on the other, one might look at ‘biographies of objects’ and their concrete modes of individuation.¹⁰ What do operations such as repurposing, reuse, recombination or recreation tell us about our relationship to temporality and futurity? Artworks and other cultural artefacts produced as non-originals or unfolding from remains – reproduced, recast or resampled – speak to a non-linear conception of time. Untying themselves from the finality to which they were once assigned, they generate bifurcations and are reinscribed in different, perhaps unexpected, time-axes suggesting, perhaps, how to reinhabit the world differently.

Created by cybernetician Gordon Pask, the *Colloquy of Mobiles* was first presented as part of *Cybernetic Serendipity* curated by Jasia Reichardt at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in 1968. Bringing together the work of 43 composers, artists and poets, as well as 87 engineers, doctors, computer systems designers and philosophers, without distinguishing these from each other, Reichardt conceptualised the exhibition as ‘the exploration and demonstration of connexions between creativity and technology (and cybernetics in particular)’.¹¹ It was also conceived to investigate ‘the links between scientific or mathematical approaches, intuitions, and the more irrational and oblique urges associated with the making of music, art and poetry’.¹² One of the ‘cybernetic devices as works of art’ included in the show, Pask’s *Colloquy of Mobiles* articulated a specific take on the analogy between the nature of cybernetic and artistic artefacts

Chloé Delarue, *TAFAA-SOPORIIS #2*, 2019. Exhibition view ‘TAFAA - ACID RAVE,’ Musée des beaux-arts, La Chaux-de-Fonds. Photograph: Florimond Dupont. Courtesy the artist

through his notion of 'aesthetically potent environments'.¹³ Pask's observation of social environments was characterised, he wrote, by the search for 'social communication, conversation and other modes of partially co-operative interaction', which 'represent an essentially human and an inherently pleasurable mode of activity'. Pask saw aesthetic potency in 'environments designed to encourage or foster the type of interaction which is (by hypothesis) pleasurable'.¹⁴ The *Colloquy of Mobiles* was one such realised environment.

The installation of five mobiles hung from a ceiling was intended to advance possibilities of 'artistic communication' and predicated on furthering (re)activity and participation – male and female robots or electro-magnetic beings engaged in a complex and open-ended game of mating in which they activated lights and sounds corresponding to movements of 'cooperation' and states of 'satisfaction'. Pask defined it as 'a group of objects, the individual mobiles that engage in discourse, that compete, co-operate and learn about one another'.¹⁵ The installation was also designed to enable interaction with humans, who could 'enter the environment and participate; possibly modifying the mode of communication as a result'.¹⁶ Despite its binary conception of gender, the work represented a remarkable apparatus and early experimentation with forms of non-organic organisation, life and communication between machines and between machines and humans.

Since 2018, cybernetician (and Pask's former student) Paul Pangaro and designer Thomas J. McLeish have been working on an exact replica of the *Colloquy of Mobiles*, exhibited for the first time in 2020.¹⁷ Instead of the electro-mechanical computer device that enabled the various interactions, the 2018 *Colloquy of Mobiles* uses 'modern digital software, sensors, and motors'.¹⁸ Pangaro and McLeish's media archaeological reconstruction of this synthetically, dynamically and actively produced machine-man social environment is intended to 'change how we feel about going home to voice interfaces such as Siri and Alexa, Cortana and Google Home, and how we experience living among smart machines'.¹⁹ In this regard, the replica intervenes in the present technological teleology fuelled by artificial intelligence and the drive towards systematic automation, re-actualising Pask's project of cybernetics – described by sociologist of science Andrew Pickering as 'thematiz[ing], the unpredictable liveliness of the world, and processes of open-ended becoming' – through a replica.²⁰

Also a replica, the third work in this selection engages with the origins of humanity and its mediation through (his-)tory telling. For his solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery in London in 2013, Thai artist Pratchaya Phinthong exhibited an exact copy of the Broken Hill skull, the first human fossil found in Africa.²¹ Aged at an estimated 299,000 years, the skull was discovered in Zambia in 1921 and is a remnant of a male *Homo heidelbergensis* – a species from 700,000 to 150,000 years ago, believed to be 'the last common ancestor of our species *H. sapiens* evolving in Africa, and *Homo neanderthalensis* (the Neanderthals) which evolved in Eurasia'.²² Taken the same year by the mining company who had been excavating that site to the Natural History Museum, the skull has since 2015 been permanently exhibited in the institution's Human Evolution gallery. Moreover, it is considered a highly significant piece in furthering the understanding of human evolution.

Close to when Phinthong conducted research for dOCUMENTA(13) around flies in Africa that provoked 'sleeping sickness', his friend, the film-maker Jakrawal Nilthamrong, told him about a peculiar object held at the Lusaka National Museum that appeared to be a replica.²³ This reproduction is on view as part of the permanent archaeology collection; the museum's website presents it as 'one of the most fascinating exhibits'.²⁴ Addressing art's function as a mediator for the voice of others through artefacts often remade or displaced, Phinthong's specific interest in the Broken Hill skull was in its being revealed as a fake by the museum's guide, which nevertheless enabled a certain narration of history, in particular the importance of discoveries made in Zambia. At Chisenhale, Phinthong exhibited the replica in exchange for a similar artefact found on the internet, while in the Lusaka National Museum, museum guide Kamfwa Chishala gave tours and explained the complex history of the skull and how it had informed the many interpretations of the development of the *Homo heidelbergensis* and *Homo sapiens*. A strange coincidence – at the time of his show at Chisenhale, not only could Phinthong see the original skull for the first time, but it was also the first instance of the object's being put on public display, of the two Broken Hills skulls existing in the same city. And as Phinthong notes, both 'came from the same place'.²⁵

In a 2013 article, archaeologist Francis B. Musonda exposed detailed evidence of the circumstances and colonial mechanics in which the skull was 'donated' to the Natural History Museum, triggering what has since then been a movement advocating for its repatriation to Zambia.²⁶ The skull is at a crossroads, its future being potentially its place of origin, and the study of our origins based on the Broken Hill skull will likely be carried over from Zambia rather than London. As for the replica, however, there seems to be no plan.

In *Memory Dispute* (2017) by Sung Tieu, the question of repurposing and remaking is addressed through two forms of violence in Vietnam: the destruction of its biodiversity wreaked by chemical Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and the use of acid fluid in skin-whitening treatments. The moving-image work juxtaposes footage of the forest, the river and a monk looking after a temple around Bạch Mã, with close-ups of a young man undergoing skin-whitening. Bạch Mã was heavily bombed by the Americans and the artist was interested in examining how it had 'recovered or whether [one] can still find traces of its harm'. What the artist found most 'mysterious about nature', she said, is how one 'can never fully understand the cause and effects' of one's action on it. While 'on the surface the landscape ha[d] grown back', she observed that 'the soil might have been altered in ways we cannot fully grasp'.²⁷ It is filmed in black and white, with an atmospheric soundtrack that translates the various intensities of the images. The soundscape produces contrasting levels of proximity to protagonists, or immersion and detachment with the filmed environment, through found and field recordings (environmental sounds or voices from a quiet protest), compositions and electronically altered sounds.

Similar to the sound, outdoor scenes also provide contrast between those shot in nature and those filmed inside in the sanitised context of the skin-whitening session. Reconstructing the situation chronologically, through close-ups, one progressively witnesses the application of a fluid – illegal and bought on black markets – on a man's arms and torso. The gloved hands of a beautician apply the harmful – even fatal – desired product with a brush, eventually allowing the patient to tear

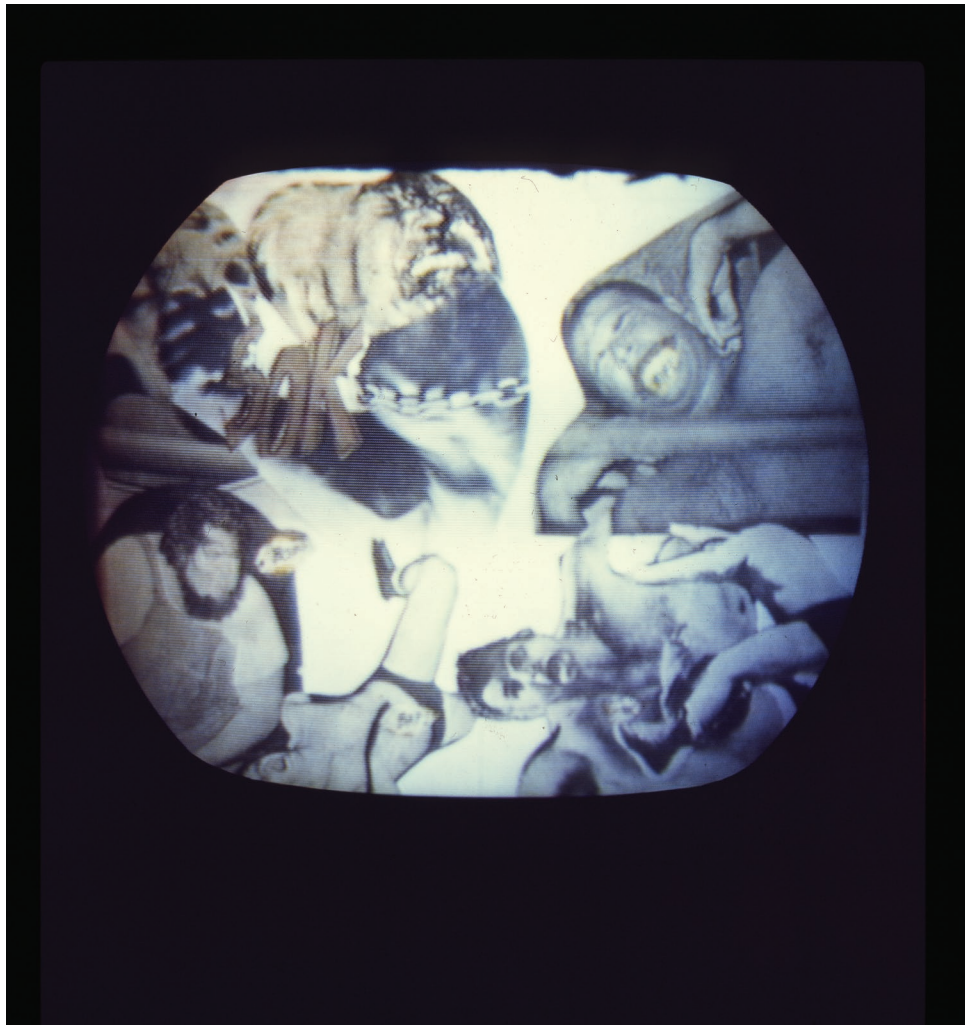
off the darker layers of his skin, the object of self-scorn. Two topical questions in contemporary Vietnam are addressed: a traumatic past that seems ever distant from the present, recovered by nature's almost miraculous powers of self-recovery; and the harmfulness of a practice fed by a desire for body normativity, arguably inherited from the colonial past. *Memory Dispute* seems to posit the impossibility of addressing history from a frontal perspective – the recovered landscape parallels an irrecoverable past – the Bạch Mã sequences have a kind of spectral aesthetics. In a similar manner, the danger potentially suffered by the young man is rendered in formal gestures, avoiding any commentary. However, these two questions within the film – of trauma born of colonialism and of nature's recovery – are traversed by the question of toxicity, bringing together land and body as sites of violence, and hence as sites to be cared for and with the potential for reconstruction.

Since 2015, under the acronym TAFAA, Chloé Delarue has been developing work that combines sculpture and installation that embodies technological hallucinations. As the generic title of her 'simulated machine bodies' suggests, *Toward A Fully Automated Appearance* addresses the issue of automation and its consequences: artificial intelligence and the limits of human agency, the datafication of the world and cybernetics.²⁸ The initial experience with one or other version of TAFAA is that of its spatial deployment and, above all, its materiality, the latter generating movement between what is perceptible and intelligible by individuals who encounter the work. TAFAA is based on a regime of materialities, the different combinations and variations of which are the vectors of the movement between genericity (expressed by the invariant element of the name 'TAFAA') and its multiple individuations (expressed by a subtitle, for example TAFAA-LAGUNA or TAFAA-OVERDRIVE SIMULATION ROOM). TAFAA makes recurrent use of certain materials: latex, for example, with which the artist often moulds objects or surfaces, giving the work an organic appearance, in the form of mouldings that are spread out or hanging in tatters. The effect of this process of translation or transfer is one of doubling, of simulation, or the ghostly presence of organs from the ruins of the 'already ancient future before it occurs', to quote Chloé Delarue. One of the speculative scenarios conceived by the artist is that of a near future when data centres have ceased to function – a hypothesis bizarrely confirmed in reality by the flooding of bitcoin farms in China, leaving endless lengths of wrecked computer racks. Operating as an archaeology of this horizon made of debris, TAFAA integrates metal frames, carcasses and hardware – the remains of an infrastructure decimated by entropy and the artificialisation of the planet by capital. Among the array of complex references instilled in TAFAA, the psychiatric phenomenon Capgras' Syndrome offers a striking parallel with the work of Chloé Delarue. In a 1923 article, psychiatrist Joseph Capgras described a form of delirium in which the patient believes that their relatives, or even themselves, have been replaced by look-alikes, most of whom have bad intentions.²⁹ In a similar way, TAFAA is the material projection of the double created in a delirium by the planetary cybernetic organism; a relic, in the form of a hand-crafted simulation, of the hallucination resulting from the artificialisation of the globe through techno-capitalist machines.

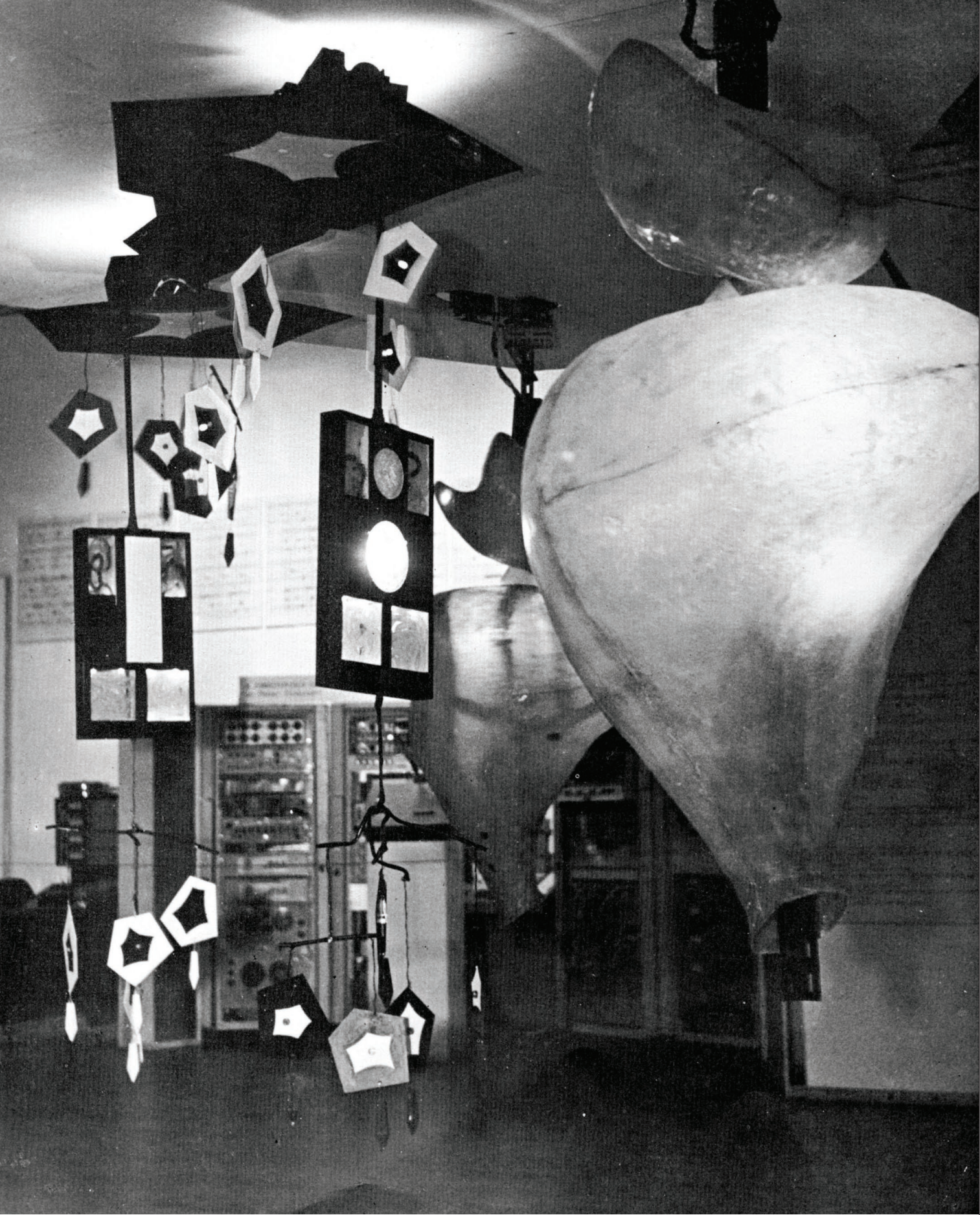
This constellation of artworks weaves a trajectory between art, cybernetics, human bodies and remains, natural and machine-made environments, and draws connections between Asia, Africa and the West. In addition to the works discussed above, discussions on the

life of the White Building in Phnom Penh and on the strategies of repurposing materials by the Senegalese artist Ndary Lô are included in this section. These works take repurposing, reusing and remaking in yet further directions.

- 1 Stan VanDerBeek, quoted in Gerald O'Grady, 'Stan VanDerBeek's "Violence Sonata" Realized In and On Channels 2 and 4, WGBH-TV, Boston January 12, 1970', unpublished typescript, Stan VanDerBeek Archive, p.3.
- 2 S. VanDerBeek, 'A Rough Outline of the "Violence Sonata" Concept for TV', 15 November 1969, unpublished typescript, Stan VanDerBeek Archive, p.2.
- 3 See S. VanDerBeek, 'Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema: A Proposal and Manifesto', *Film Culture*, no.40, Spring 1966, pp.15–18.
- 4 Chelsea Spengemann, 'New Restorations from the Stan VanDerBeek Archive', LUX [website], 6 February 2020, available at <https://lux.org.uk/writing/new-restorations-from-the-stan-vanDerBeek-archive> (last accessed on 5 October 2020).
- 5 S. VanDerBeek, quoted in Gerald O'Grady, 'Stan VanDerBeek's "Violence Sonata"', *op. cit.*, p.3.
- 6 S. VanDerBeek, 'A Rough Outline of the "Violence Sonata" Concept for TV', *op. cit.*, p.1, 'untitled (SV Description)', unpublished typescript, Stan VanDerBeek Archive.
- 7 S. VanDerBeek, 'Culture: Intercom and Expanded Cinema. A Proposal and Manifesto', *op. cit.*, p.16.
- 8 S. VanDerBeek, 'A Rough Outline of the "Violence Sonata" Concept for TV', *op. cit.*, p.2.
- 9 Yuk Hui, 'One Hundred Years of Crisis', *e-flux journal*, no.108, April 2020, available at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/108/326411/one-hundred-years-of-crisis/> (last accessed on 5 October 2020).
- 10 On the notion of 'biography of objects', see Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Biographies of Scientific Objects*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- 11 Jasja Reichardt, 'Cybernetics, art and ideas', in J. Reichardt (ed.), *Cybernetics, Art and Ideas*, London: Studio Vista, 1971, p.11.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Gordon Pask, 'A comment, a case history and a plan', in J. Reichardt, *Cybernetics, Art and Ideas*, *op. cit.*, p.76.
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 G. Pask, 'The colloquy of mobiles', in J. Reichardt (ed.), *Cybernetic Serendipity: The Computer and the Arts*, London: Studio International, 1968, p.34.
- 16 G. Pask, 'A comment, a case history and a plan', *op. cit.*, p.88.
- 17 The replica was included in 'Neurones. Les intelligences simulées', Centre Pompidou, Paris, 26 March – 20 April 2020. It is now part of the permanent collection of the ZKM Karlsruhe.
- 18 Paul Pangaro, 'Remaking Pask's COLLOQUY OF MOBILES', Design & Conversation [website], 14 January 2018, available at <https://pangaro.com/design-conversation/2018/01/remaking-pasks-colloquy-of-mobiles/> (last accessed on 7 October 2020).
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Andrew Pickering, 'Cybernetics and the Mangle: Ashby, Beer and Pask', *Social Studies of Science*, vol.32, no.3, June 2002, p.430.
- 21 Pratchaya Phinthong, 'Broken Hill', Chisenhale Gallery, London, 6 July–1 September 2013.
- 22 Chris Stringer quoted in Josh Davis, 'Dating the Broken Hill skull: Homo heidelbergensis was younger than we thought', National History Museum, [website], 1 April 2020, available at <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/news/2020/april/dating-the-broken-hill-skull--homo-heidelbergensis.html> (last accessed on 7 October 2020).
- 23 Katie Guggenheim, 'Chisenhale Interviews: Pratchaya Phinthong' (exh. pamphlet), July 2013, available at https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Chisenhale_Interviews_Pratchaya__Phinthong-1.pdf (last accessed on 7 October 2020).
- 24 See National Museum Board Zambia [website], <https://www.museumszambia.org/lusaka-museum-exhibitions-programs/permanent-exhibition-archaeology> (last accessed on 7 October 2020).
- 25 K. Guggenheim, 'Chisenhale Interviews: Pratchaya Phinthong', *op. cit.*
- 26 Francis B. Musonda, 'Decolonising the Broken Hill Skull: Cultural Loss and a Pathway to Zambian Archaeological Sovereignty', *African Archaeological Review*, vol.30, no.2, June 2013.
- 27 Email conversation with the artist, 11 June 2020.
- 28 This term was coined by curator Sabine Rusterholz Petko who wrote about the artist for a group show titled *Me, Inc.*, Rotwand Gallery, Zürich, 2016. See her short text on the artist at the gallery website: <http://rotwandgallery.com/exhibitions/group-show-16> (last accessed on 7 October 2020).
- 29 Joseph Capgras and Jean Reboul-Lachaux, 'L'illusion des "sosies" dans un délire systématisé chronique (The Illusion of "Doubles" in a Chronic Systemic Delirium)', *Bulletin de la Société clinique de médecine mentale*, 1923, no.11, pp.6–16.

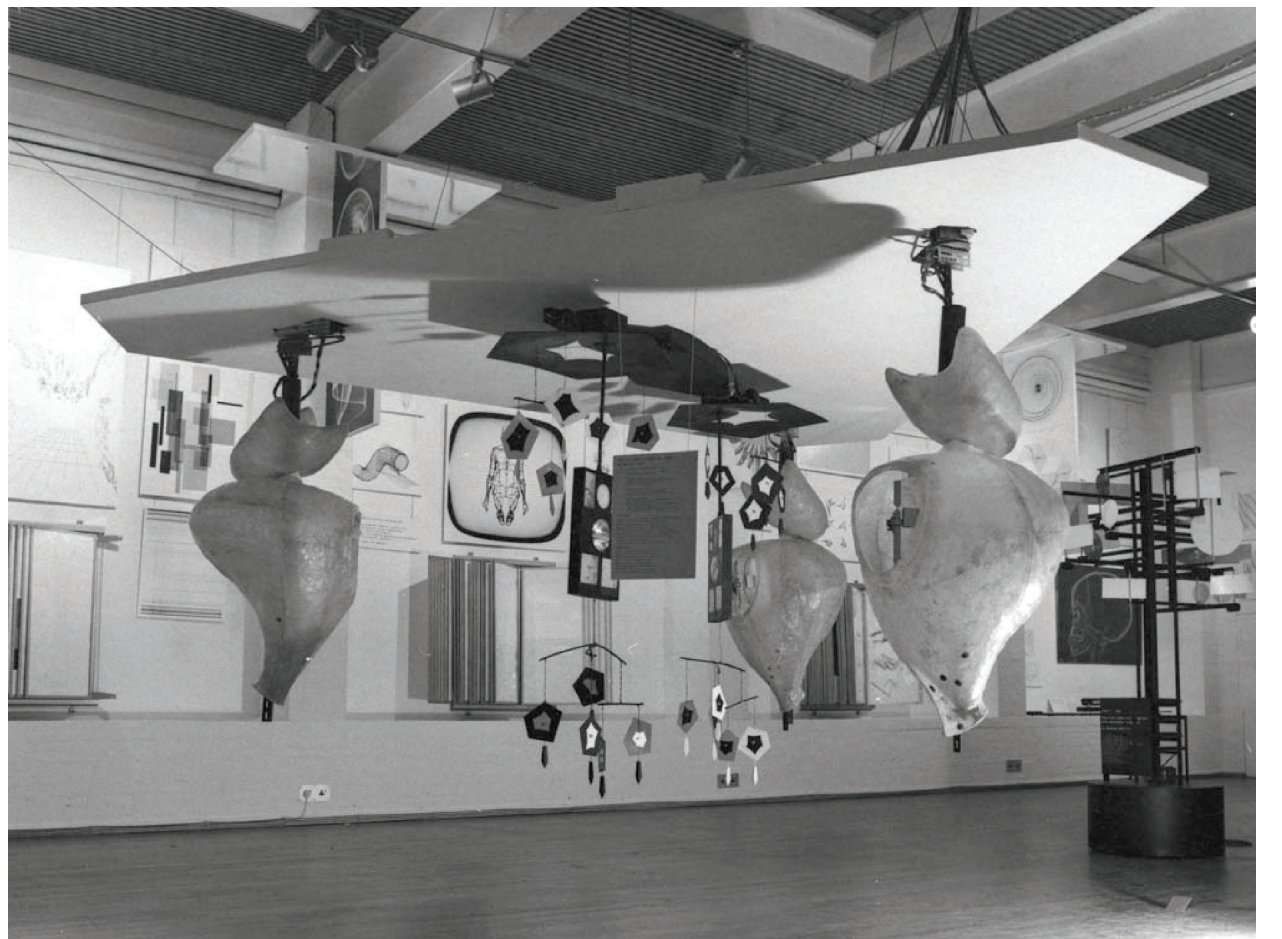


Stan VanDerBeek, *Violence Sonata*, 1970.
 Courtesy StanVanDerBeek Estate



Gordon Pask, *The Colloquy of Mobiles*, 1968.
© Cybernetic Serendipity, Institute for
Contemporary Arts, London.
Courtesy Jasia Reichardt

Gordon Pask, *The Colloquy of Mobiles*, 2018,
reconstruction by Paul Pangaro and TJ McLeish.
Courtesy Paul Pangaro and TJ McLeish







Pratchaya Phinthong, *Broken Hill*, 2013.
Commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery.
Photograph: Mark Blower.
Courtesy Chisenhale Gallery



Sung Tieu, *Memory Dispute*,
2017, video.
Courtesy of the artist and
Emalin, London



Chloé Delarue, *TAFAA-HIVE*, 2018.
 Exhibition view 'Future Love.
 Desire and Kinship in Hypernature,'
 Haus der elektronischen Künste, Basel.
 Photograph: Florimond Dupont.
 Courtesy the artist



Chloé Delarue, *TAFAA-ACID RAVE*, 2019.
 Exhibition view 'TAFAA - ACID RAVE,'
 Musée des beaux-art La Chaux-de-Fonds.
 Photograph: Florimond Dupont.
 Courtesy the artist