

Keep
Yourself
Clean





Keep Yourself Clean is the first programmatic art exhibition by VOLNA and reconstructs the art collective's main works spanning from the moment it was formed through the present in a virtual space. Visitors can move freely around the exhibition, selecting their own viewpoint and immersing themselves in the environment of each installation.

Since its formation in St. Petersburg, Russia in 2016, VOLNA has dedicated itself to light art and interdisciplinary art practices employing new technologies. The artists are known for their unusual exhibition formats, monumental installations and scenographic solutions for the electronic music scene. Throughout its four years of existence, VOLNA has maintained financial and aesthetic independence by creating 17 light installations and around 30 stage designs for festivals and performances.

Despite the site-specific nature of the presented works, the overarching artistic principle behind them is a purity of form and clarity in visual expression. The context and artistic task of each work is conveyed, first and foremost, through the language of form. The latter often turns out to be deceptively simple, freed of excessive details and minimalistic in its expressiveness, and thereby corresponds to the abstract ideological basis behind it. At the same time, for

each abstract idea, be it a struggle between opposite forces, timelessness or the fragmentation of memory, there is a very concrete image that provokes characteristic sensations. The image allows the viewer to get used to the installation environment and creates the conditions for a deeply immersive interaction with the artwork. Work with form and image is subordinated to seeking out the quintessence of the sensation it evokes and reproducing this sensation through expressive means.

Many of the presented works are characterized by ornamentalism, based on the principles of generative construction of form in accordance with assigned parameters. This allows for increasing the variability in form development almost without limit. Placed within this context, Sol LeWitt's phrase "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art"¹ takes on a technogenic meaning, bringing the concept of art to the absolute of "self-assembled works." The works live in time and multiply their hypostases according to proportions and rules set by the artists. But these hypostases are not ephemeral: they represent the natural evolution of a work in real time.

In VOLNA's works, these expressive means originate in technology. Yet, despite falling under the aegis of "technological art," the technology itself is

not the central focus of the artists' attention. The technologies they employ, whether innovative devices or tried and true electrical circuits, are simply a natural tool for exploring new creative territories, blurring the line between "technological" and "non-technological" art.

The primary expressive element in VOLNA's work is light and its various characteristics, its interaction with space, as well as its movement, the rhythm of chiaroscuro and the way chiaroscuro scenarios unfold in relation to time. Some works include synchronized sound, created to interact closely with the light dramaturgy and complement the media reality of the installation.

The space of the virtual exhibition itself is heterotopic and at the same time proportional to the original exhibition locations. The model exhibits displayed inside it are as close as possible to their real prototypes and preserve their structural details, including the nature of the lighting and scenarios behind each of the live installations. The original sound design and ambient sound environments are reproduced, and the context and theme of each work is disclosed in an accompanying text. Thus, VOLNA's preoccupation with seeking out reality and production processes is reflected in a simulated world. For this reason, only works that were realized in the ma-

terial world were selected for display. The exhibition is characterized by the presence of real space, living according to its own laws in another (virtual) space, as well as the merging of virtual and real spaces, a synthesis of various methods for transmitting information and their hypertextuality. As media historian Norbert Bolz once put it, in media reality "thematically structured visual worlds are supposed to bring a surreal condensation of the experience: more real than reality."²

Accepting this challenge, the exhibition **Keep Yourself Clean** attempts to embrace all the real and virtual layers of information that make up each of the works, and then let the works themselves become the determinants of perception. With their help, each of the contexts will "re-sort" in the virtual world, rethink and obey the laws of perception, and each work, in turn, will become an experience of sensory contemplation.

¹ Quoted in: Kosuth, Joseph. *Art after Philosophy*, 1969.

² Bolz, Norbert. *ABC der Medien*. Muenchen: W. Fink, 2007, p. 40.

Artists' Statement

Tasks. The main goal VOLNA pursues when creating new works is to develop a context-dependent environment that provokes an emotional dialogue with the viewer. The specific site a work is being designed for is of key importance in its formation, and the ultimate ideal would be creating a piece that merges completely with the space it inhabits, filling it with new content and functions. Interaction with the viewer primarily takes place in a passive and natural way – in other words, there is no formal interface, although the very fact of having an observer present initiates interaction.

Method. As a starting point, we form an image and physically visualize it in a highly abstract way. The scale of a work relates directly to the image itself and the theme behind it. In large works, we operate with more general concepts, while with smaller pieces we focus on something more specific. This approach is based on the close connection between an object and its context, taking in account the specifics of how a viewer will perceive it. We operate with just one bedrock principle here: that a work's general artistic message should

be broadcast in the minimum possible interaction time allowed by any given space. Unlike more sequential art forms (e.g. music, cinema), the messages in our works do not have any formal beginning or ending and can be apprehended from any given moment and, for pieces with multiple components, in any order. On the other hand, the physical variability of our works distinguishes them from sculpture and painting. In a major sense, this is what creates the preconditions behind our use of abstract forms and succinct visual formulations.

The form. The more complex a work's form, the smaller its size. This is dictated by both practical and purely artistic considerations. Larger objects require extended interaction with the viewer, which, together with the theme of the work, necessitates establishing a more universal means for a longer dialogue. In a certain sense, this transforms an art piece into an artistic instrument that itself creates art. In such cases, we give preference to simple forms and structures that are more universal in nature. The ideal here would be an intangible four-dimensional display occupying all possible space. Small works, on the

other hand, tend to be more visually independent and sculpture-like. The ideal informing smaller works is the same, but their size limitations demand a more formalist approach. For works of all sizes, it is fair to say that the methods we employ in their formal language arise from the physical and technical limitations of the materials and technology we are working with. This principle is based on the desire to create voluminous works within the limitations of the material world.

Problematics. The choice of topics is infinitely wide, and they exist outside of any hierarchy. Unlike many creative groups that consistently develop on one theme in their work, for VOLNA the initial concept is merely a starting point for our creative approach within a given context, allowing us to remain more flexible and responsive to changes in the surrounding environment. The practice of collective creativity allows us to form a more objective view of the topic we are working on and to avoid excesses of individual reflection. This is also greatly facilitated by the diverse experience of every participant taking part in our creations. It does not make sense

to formalize and generalize the spectrum of topics that we work on.

Medium. The interaction between light and context. Light is the main tool we use to facilitate non-verbal interaction with viewers. Light helps us achieve a necessary level of abstraction since it is more efficient than any other material for constructing dynamic two- and three-dimensional structures. We understand different types of light as different artistic materials (gouache, tempera), and the main forms of light (point, cone, plane) are used as elements in a three-dimensional composition. In creative approach, we use material reflectors in combination with light. Within a given work, we minimize our use of different kinds of light sources – as well as reflectors – in order to maintain compositional purity.

Technology. Despite the technological nature of our works, we give preference to using the most appropriate material in every case. While we certainly are interested in technological innovations that could open up new possibilities, the use of new technologies in and of itself is not a goal for us.

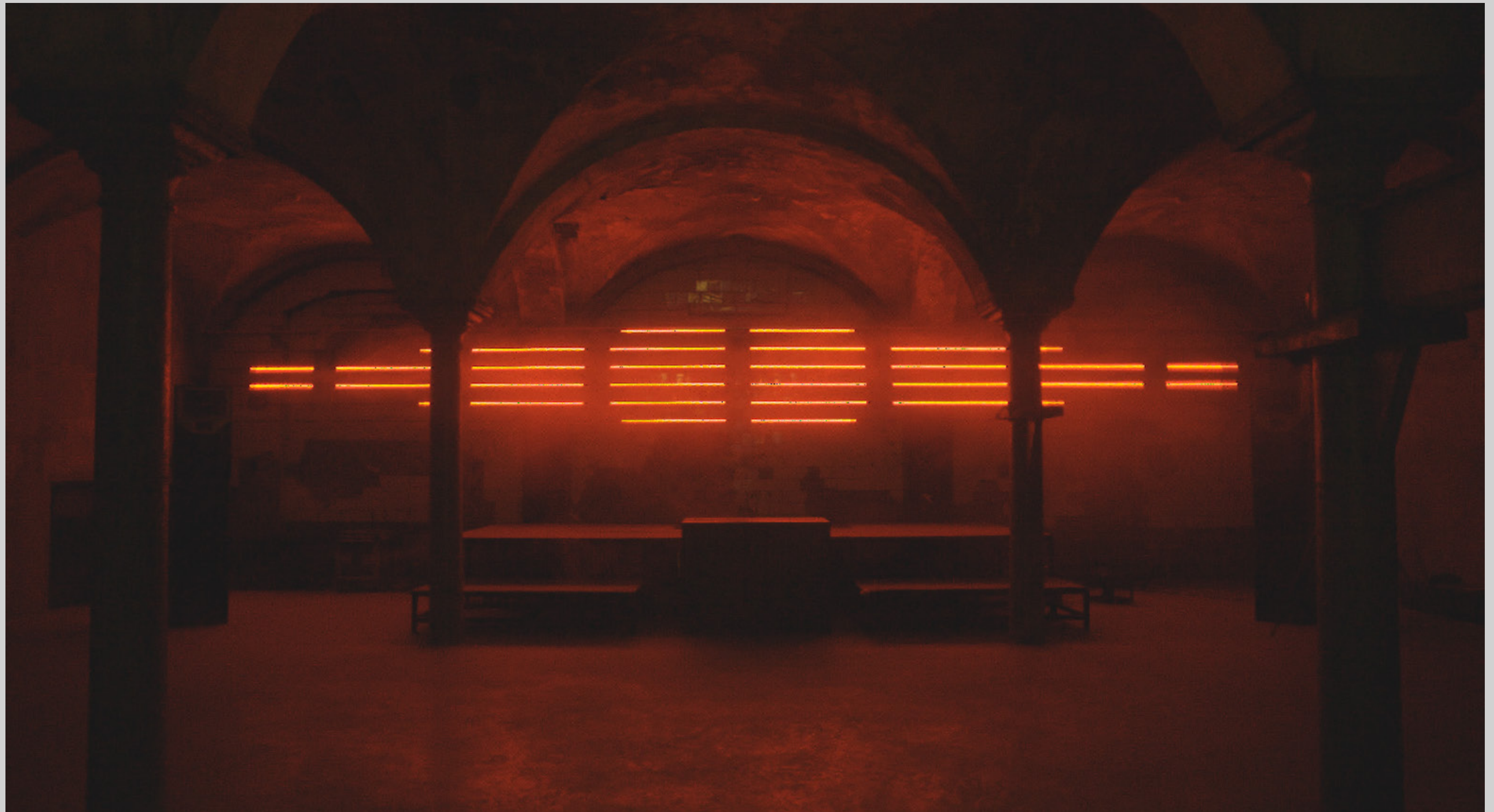
Production. The process of production, the very act of doing and labor itself culminate in our final understanding of each specific work, occupying the nexus between matter and creative will. Unlike technology and the concept of a work – a means and an impulse respectively – the production process itself is an act of creativity to which the meaning and often form of the final work are ultimately subordinate. However, this process is never explicitly represented or presented along with the work. The final exposition is maximally devoid of traces of the production process and wiped of any information about it. This experience is shared only by members of the group and remains invisible to the viewer.

VOLNA and the Characteristics of a Wave

Pavel Golubev

The name of the art group VOLNA (which in Russian means “wave”) is clear to anyone who has seen their work. This word recalls theories about the wave nature of light, and VOLNA specifically creates light installations.¹ The laws of optics, light, its characteristics and how it is perceived provide both a basis for aesthetic reflection during a work’s creation and also the inexorable conditions that influence what form each work takes.

For VOLNA, this is often found in art forms that make reference to technology and science tools. For example, in the installation **Schwarzwald**, light segments are variously lengthened and compressed on vertical LED strips in a manner resembling the readings of sensors. In **Powerline**, broken curved lines alternating quickly before the viewer are reminiscent of statistical graphs or fragments from drawings. It should be added that the laconic and at times purist forms that are characteristic of VOLNA’s works carry distinctive traces of the theories and trends of functionalism. VOLNA frequently exhibits its works in spaces that were previously technical sites. For example, the installation **Octave** was created for place-



Octave

¹ The sea note in the title is also not accidental: VOLNA is collective from St. Petersburg, and the word itself stands for “wave” in Russian.

ment in a workshop that brewed beer for two centuries, and the aforementioned **Powerline** was presented on the premises of an engineering plant on the outskirts of St. Petersburg.

It is important to note that VOLNA shares the basic principles of site-specific art. An impressive example of this is the **NEUBAU** installation, designed specifically for display in a 15-meter-tall elevator shaft, where (along with adjacent viewing platforms) the St. Petersburg gallery Vertical used to be located.

In this sense, the group can be placed within a category that is sometimes associated with the future of artistic endeavors – science art, media art, the art of new technologies. But for VOLNA, light is not merely an object of electrodynamic study. Rather, it is the very foundation of old art: chiaroscuro, shadow, lighting, perspective – everything is connected to light.

One of VOLNA's works is a meditation on the nature of depiction that is similar to old paintings in terms of its representative approach. In 2019 at the Zentrale Gallery in Vienna, the group presented a series of objects entitled **Caustic Studies** in which the laser glare of a complex, poisonous green color wanders around the surfaces of light boxes, depicting the constantly-changing colorful

canvas of paintings.

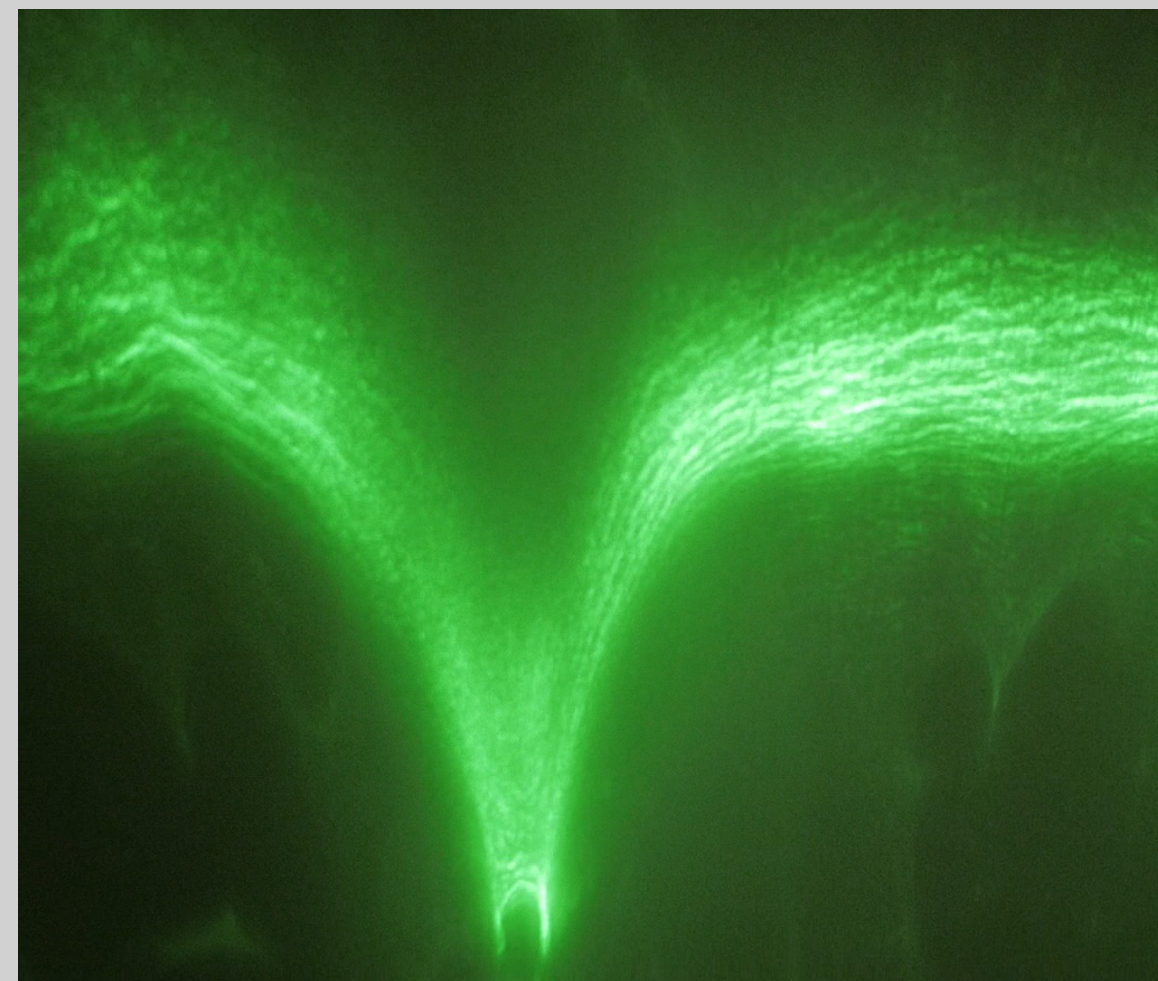
A similar technique is applied in the installation **Sub Rosa**, in which geometric patterns on rotating petals replace the static colored panes in a stained-glass rose. This work was created for the Blooming Festival in Pergola, Italy, where it was exhibited in an underground hall shaped similarly to an apse that was especially fitting for the stained glass. VOLNA employed a similar technique in their scenographic work for Blank Club in St. Petersburg. Red laser beams passed beneath the dance floor's vaulted ceiling and through a stylized stained-glass window with the image of the all-seeing eye.

Here it is worth recalling the third meaning of the word light – the religious-philosophical sense of light as a source and, at the same time, precondition for the world's existence. Although such interpretations are entirely permissible, at heart VOLNA does not operate with ontological categories, but rather with individual meanings. With this in mind, the installation **Vague** is a reflection on the nature of memory. **Sub Rosa** aims to show the mysterious meaning of one-on-one dialogue. **Duel** is a study on the nature of conflict and its driving force.

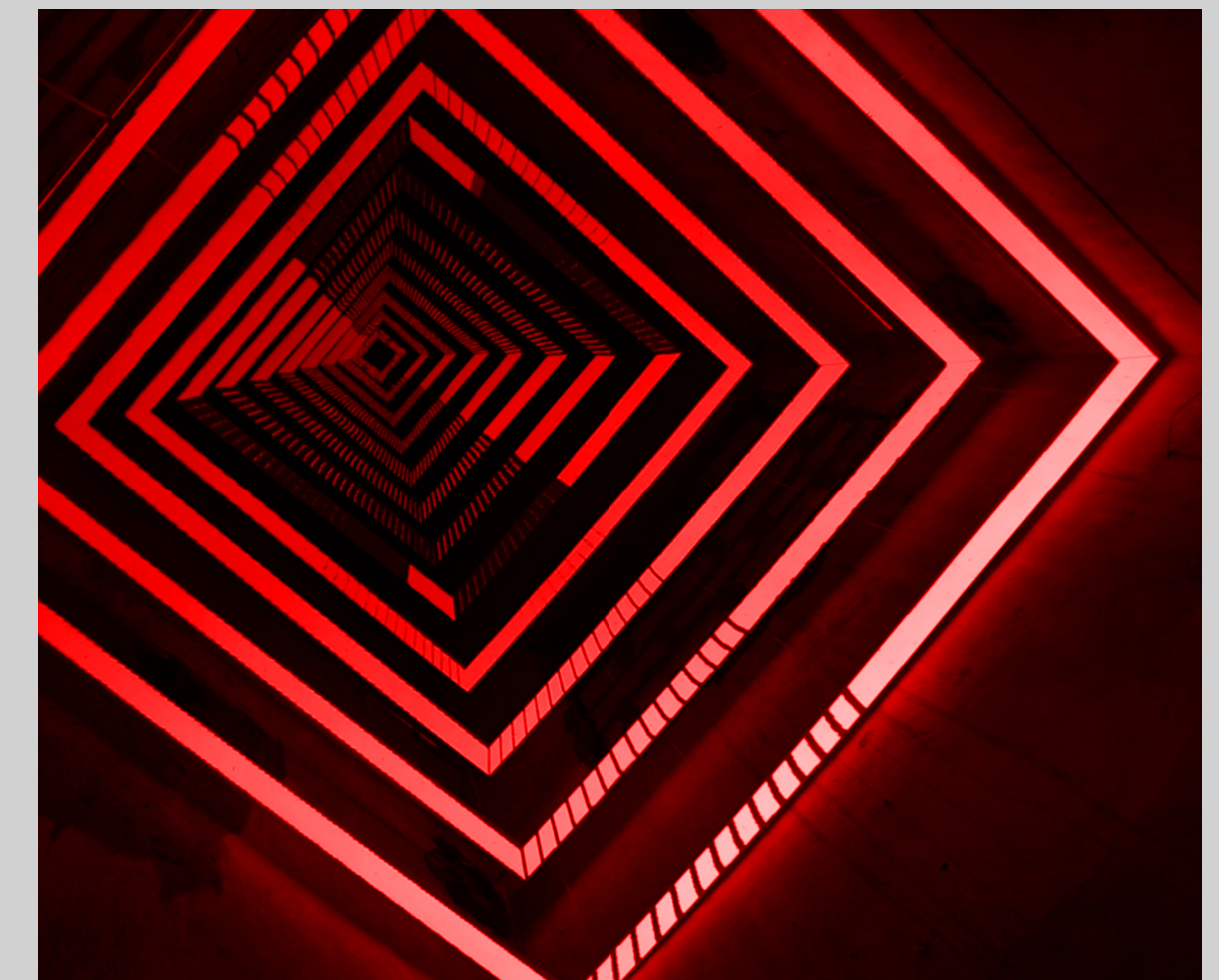
The subjective connotations discussed here are tied to the emotional involve-



Sub Rosa



Caustic Studies



NEUBAU

ment of viewers, who are necessary for interaction with the work. Of course, no one knows what impression they will have – and it is not at all necessary that it even be clearly defined and articulated. Appreciating everything that is in between, ambiguous and mixed, VOLNA directs its works toward people in strange, extraordinary and intermediate states.

In this context, doing design work for electronic music festivals (which is a part of VOLNA's work) appears part of a coherent strategy. Using the same visual language and technical means, the team's scenographic creations are dramatic and at times even approach the sublime.

In general, the formal attributions of a particular type of production (installation, design object, scenographic project) is to a large extent determined by the purpose of that particular work. But even the largest of these are effectively turned into compact objects that can be built into or independently form an artistically designed environment.

The group's desire for avoiding everything connected with the nomenclature of artistic movements and normative concepts is explained in part by the different backgrounds of VOLNA's participants. Furthermore, despite this or

that professional specialization, in each work's creative process members are faced with a new and always unique experience in literally realizing objects that are sometimes large and always complex. Gaining this type of experience serves in itself as a kind of challenge and incentive for group members.

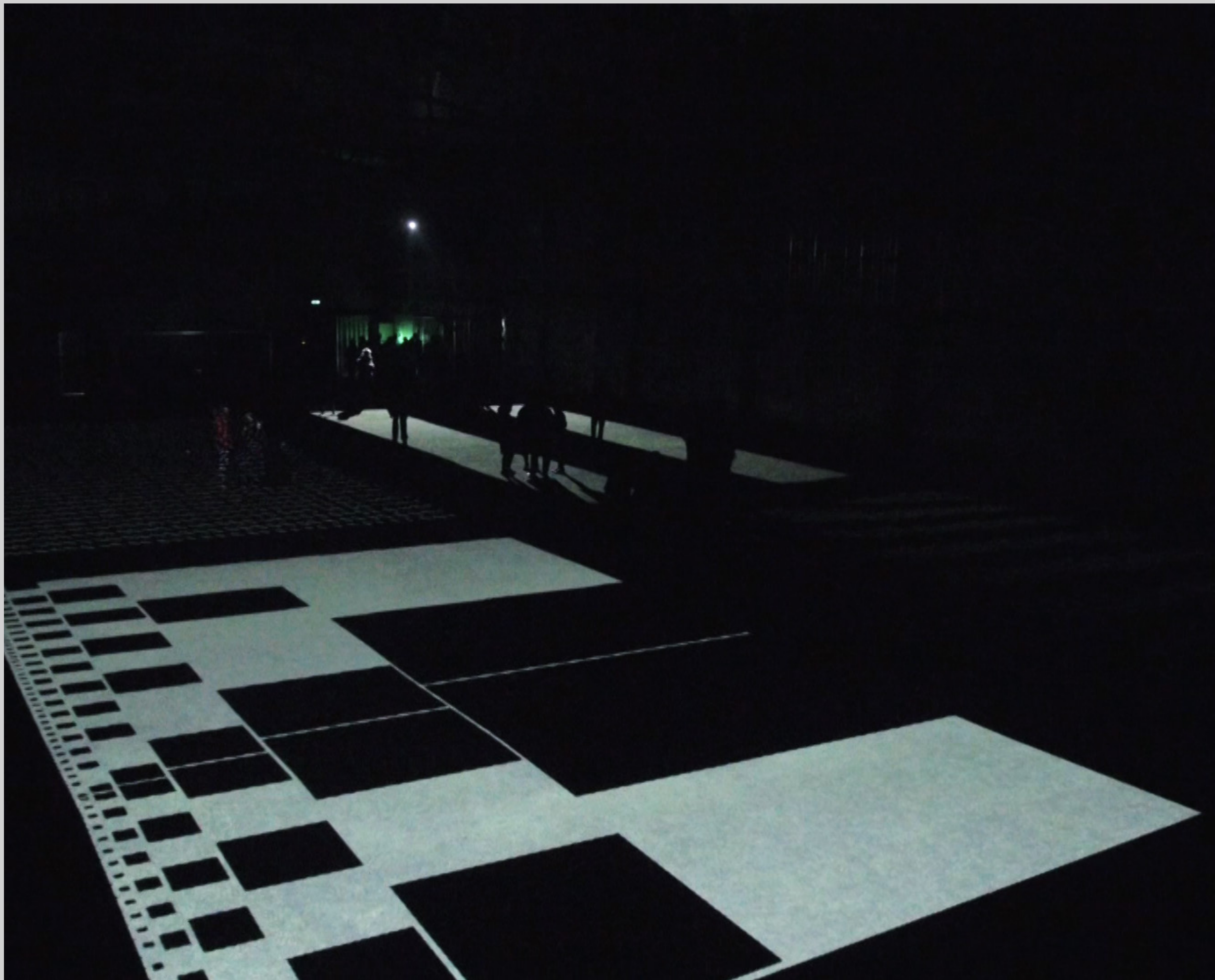
And so here as well VOLNA navigates through the dark space between disciplines, artistic practices, genres and means of representation. In this darkness, it sheds light in the literal sense and creates organization with the help of various light sources, glasses, mirrors and mechanisms. This does not imply capturing and controlling: the flickering contours in a shimmer of light or the sharply outlined forms disappear after just a few moments in the darkness and are then immediately replaced by others.



Vague

The Law of Preserving the Unspoken

Galina Polikarpova



The Open Plain

The title of VOLNA's virtual retrospective and current rallying cry functions along the principle of a light beam. The phrase "Keep Yourself Clean" diverges into rays of meanings and has space both for predicting events that have led to disinfectants' growth in popularity and the key conditions characterizing light and kinetic art. A purity of form, color and, of course, light are the basic elements behind these endeavors. Clean and respectively ideal, they envelop the viewer. This "bathing" of the subject with a "wave" can be interpreted both in practical as well as ethical-religious senses, and most importantly it indicates the perceptual quality of light art.

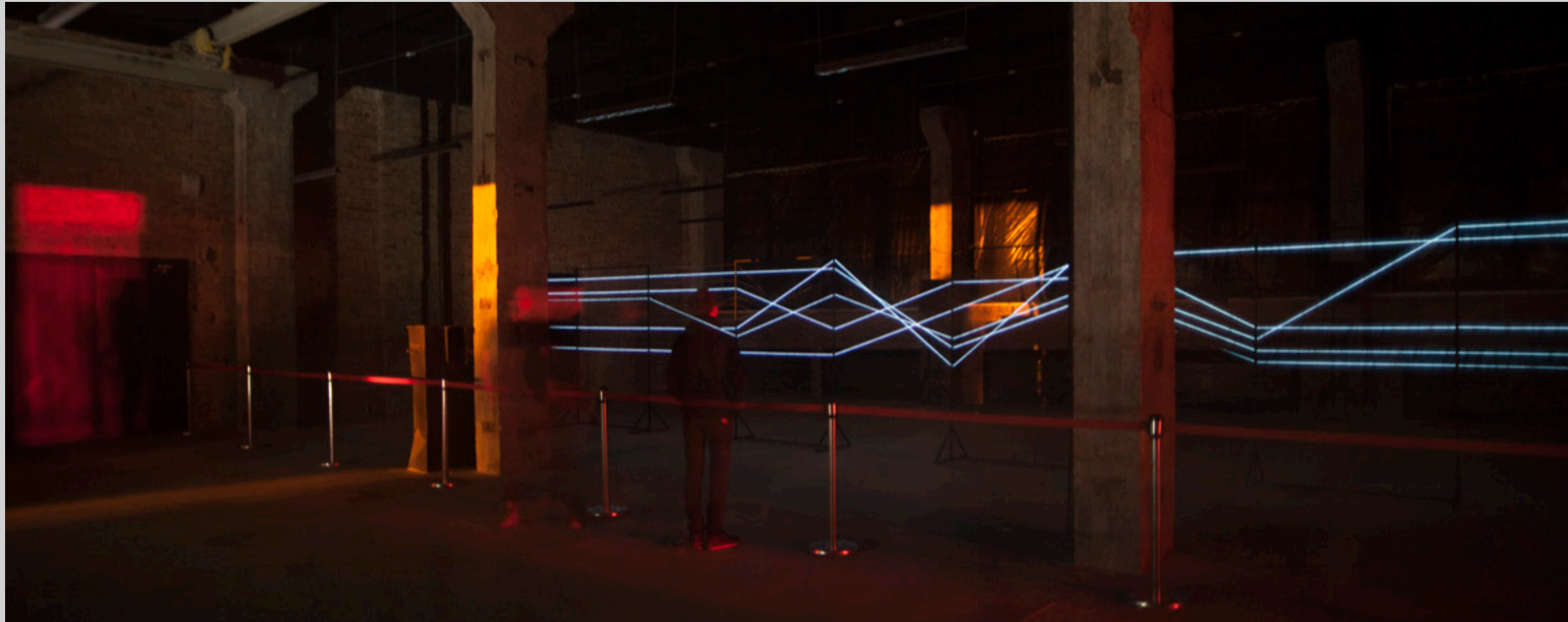
Effects that actively affect the retina, localized colors, the imposing spaces that the installations occupy, as well as the accompanying sound designs – all of this has an influence on the nervous system, provoking and projecting a wide range of emotional states. An impulse leads to an insight, and thus illumination in the case of light objects fits like never before.

This is not the first time VOLNA has addressed the issue of cleanliness as an absence of interference, barriers or limits. In 2016, their project **The Open Plain**

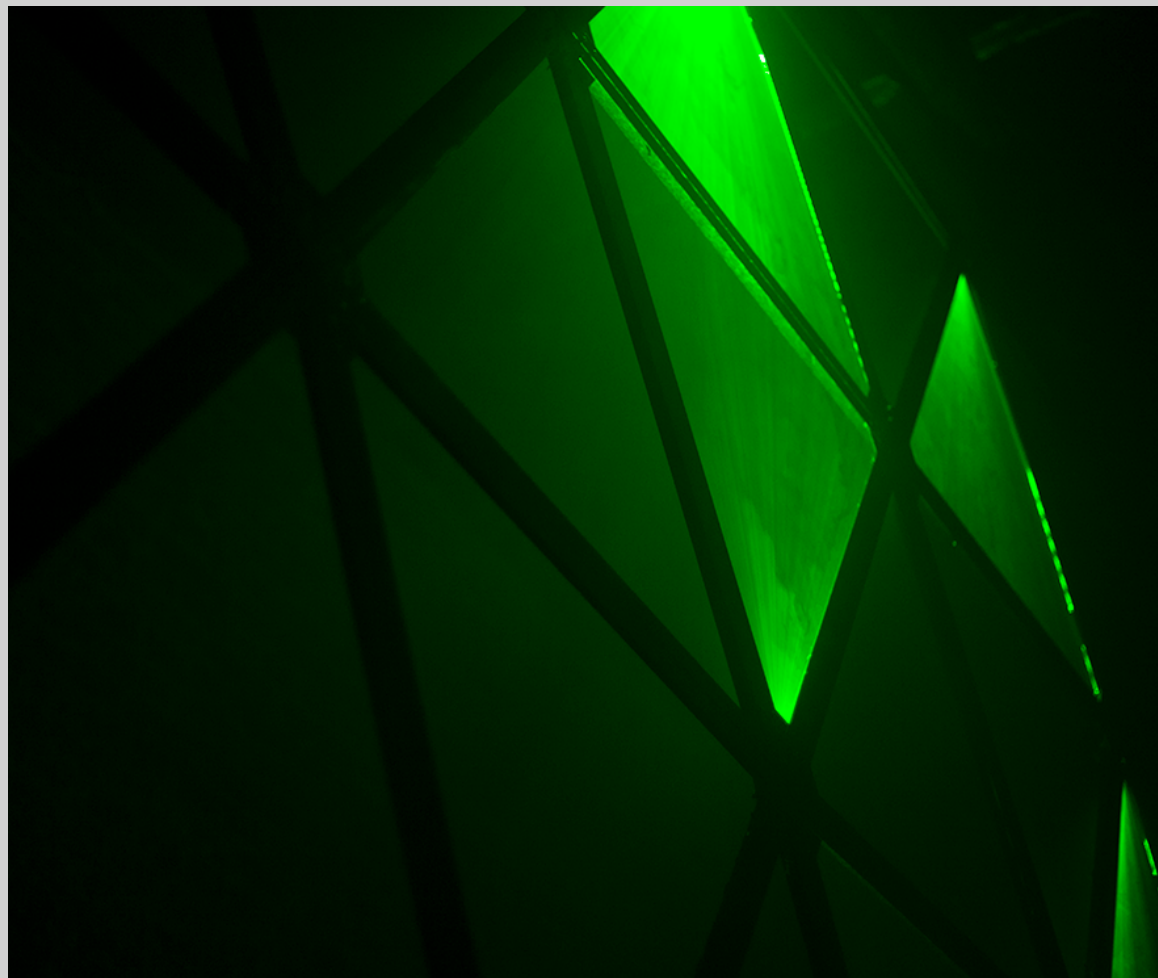
– a real football field filled with abstract flickering markings – was exhibited at Hangar. In flashes across the achromatic spectrum, one guessed at the contours and conflicting conditions of an unpredictably regulated sporting event. The surfaces were flooded with electric light, transforming the site. However, it acquired phantom outlines not only through changing markers, but also from how much viewers got used to the space since "shape does not remain constant, for which each shift in position the viewer also constantly changes the apparent shape of the work."¹ As they began to apprehend the illuminated parts, visitors to Hangar wound up being disoriented by darkness itself, which the artists use as a working tool along with light.

This relationship to darkness as a material manifested itself from the art group's very first work – the audio-visual installation **NEUBAU**, which was shown at the beginning of 2016 in the Vertical gallery. A minimalistic visual sequence rushed across square frames, climbing and overcoming 15 meters of space inside an abandoned elevator shaft. The pattern rhythmically cut into the darkness of a shaft devoid of any additional

¹ Quoted in: Foster, Hal; Krauss, Rosalind; Bois, Yve-Alain; Buchloh, Benjamin; Joselit, David. *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2016, p. 654.



Powerline



Malachite



Rotor

light sources, and through this an imaginary or sought-after future crashed into the architecture of oblivion, flickering with Eastern European variations on the anime post-apocalyptic. The invisible space itself, permeated with dust particles and frosty steam, was turned into an integral element of the work.

With the installation **NEUBAU**, the group declared that its art was site-specific. This spatially oriented method, clearly embodied in its debut, was chosen by the media artists in creating subsequent works. **Sub Rosa**, a kinetic stained-glass window, occupied a vault with a corresponding shape, while the laser mosaic **Malachite** transformed a brick wall in a former factory. On this same site, the art center Artplay, which occupies the former design bureau of an engineering factory in St. Petersburg, VOLNA had previously produced **Powerline**, a “short circuit” that outlines the long workshop with luminescent line objects. **Octave** literally added to the premises of another enterprise, the former Stepan Razin brewery, through a running line that transformed a stall into stage lighting using the dotted line of an LED strip

Site-specific art implies that a particular location is indispensable and that there is a mutual influence between a work and its site. Reconstructing these works, which are dissimilar both in con-

cept and embodiment, making up the collective’s light and kinetic arsenal is especially problematic when creating a holistic retrospective exposition. Moving objects online deprives the viewer of a fully-absorptive sensory experience. However, such virtual “conservation” does allow for recreating many of the nuances in the projects, as well as reconfiguring them to a new reality since online art documentation “can be changed at will because its identity and reproducibility are guaranteed by the form of its ‘real,’ external referent and not by its form.”²

Making the move online has long been seen as natural, and pandemic conditions have only confirmed the inevitability of submitting to cyberspace. Additionally, the very nature of the light artists’ visual and aesthetic exploration is close to net and video game art, given the association with new media. The VOLNA team, whose activities include, among other things, developing software for installations, is familiar with computer potential on an organic level.

This interest in technology is affirmed specifically in the form the works take, but the ideas that nourish them are diverse and not directly related to progressive approaches. The source of inspiration is not real inventions, but rather a kind of science fiction. Thus,

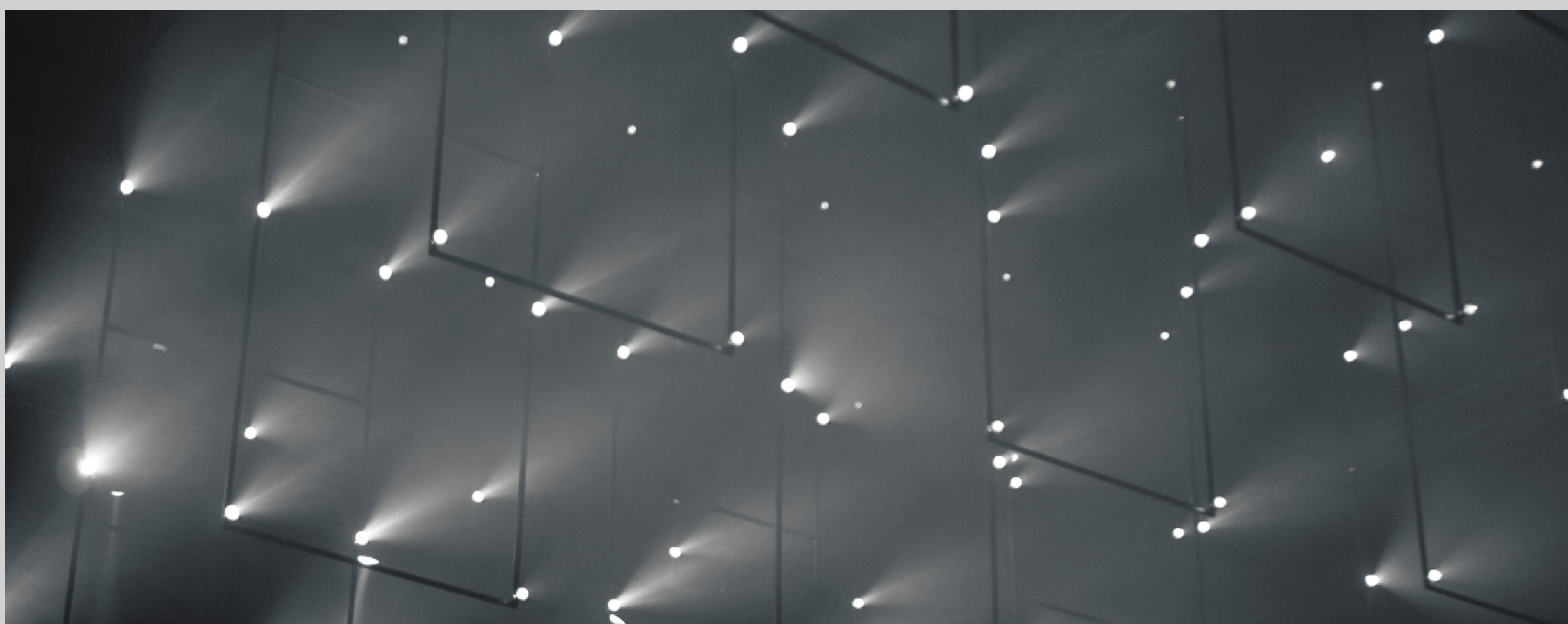
² Groys, Boris. *In the flow*. New-York: Verso Books, 2018



Duel



Nymphéas



Empyrean

the audio-visual installation **Rotor** was inspired by American physicist Frank Tipler's concept for a time machine, and **Aelita** by the early space travel fantasies of Soviet filmmakers.

The artists' ideas about constellations and atmospheric phenomena were embodied in two works from 2019, **Empyrean** and **Aurora**. Cosmogonic processes themselves are close to the "generative design" of the natural environment. VOLNA transformed the glow of the heavens into multiple diodes and coherent laser beams and arranged them into minimalist structures. Plants also live according to strict natural mechanisms. The circadian rhythms of water lilies depend directly on light – the changes of day and night. These daily changes and the elegiac dances of water lilies, with their enchanting and false optical reflections, are included in the group's latest work, the kinetic installation **Nymphéas**. In this way, cold electric currents create living and vibrant matter through the lens of light art, and VOLNA is moving closer to science art.

Despite some common features, scenography and installations do not fit into precise classifications: the vagueness of borders exists both as an artistic method and as a tactic the authors follow when creating different types of works. VOLNA is experimenting with

scale, representing monumental and "easel" objects. The latter, for example, include **Caustic Studies**, a series shown in Vienna's gallery Zentrale last year. In it, light sources glide along special light-boxes, generating caustic patterns that resemble at different times the aurora, the depths of water, a painted canvas or glitch effects. In **Vague**, the very observation point itself concealed uncertainty. Installed outside usual premises on the territory of the Fanes-Sennes-Prags Natural Park in Italy, the object refracted a mountain panorama. By changing opaque and transparent surfaces, the piece demonstrates the aberrations in memory and the impossibility being confident in peripheral vision, or any type of knowledge for that matter.

VOLNA tosses a coin together with the viewer. That's what the large-scale light installation **Duel** is about: 16 discs change trajectories in a synchronous struggle containing disputes between each other and with themselves. VOLNA tosses coins with the viewer in other works as well, and each time there is no winner or loser. Objects do not suppose answers. Instead, they fluctuate in space and freeze in mysterious understatement – both in accordance with physical laws and as if in spite of them.

The Wave Rolling In

Pavel Arsenev

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things*¹

More and more often lately, we’ve been forced to witness “new waves” of one legendary event or another. In most cases, the original precedent keeps escaping our attention while being verified by nothing but its own iteration: If something has a *new* wave, it must have a preceding one as well. It is a mutually beneficial cooperation of the old and the new: The first one acquires its rightful place (being left in peace), and the second one, meaning the new one, acquires a jumping-off point that – thanks to the ambiguity of this expression –

combines the best of succession and rupture, discrepancy and replication (of the very same thing), the emergence of something ultimately different and the return of the repressed.

Not that many art initiatives are ready to withdraw from this tedious rhythm of rolling over one another: The new over the old, the second over the first one. One way or another, you have to enter idea trading and negotiations with tradition when you start feeling that your emergence was not only illegitimate but also went pretty much unnoticed. In the end, this mutual vitalization of the new and the old turns out to be a prudent (self-)mortification as well. If there was Necrorealism, then Necroactivism should rise (“on its bones”). If there was the Chto Delat (What Is to Be Done) group,² then there should be research institutes studying what is to be done. Even if cyberfeminism has already emerged (a record-breakingly early manifestation of the prefix), an upgrade to cyberfeminism 2.0 should be launched making it even more advanced

and complete. As a rule, new waves no less eagerly bear testimony to their own non-novelty.

Against this background, compounded by lack of recognition and institutional amnesia,³ with its all too common St. Petersburg views and skyline, the emergence of the art collective whose name – VOLNA – in Russian means “wave” appears to be a remarkable event, at least on the level of the play of signifiers. In the absence of big budgets and institutes of contemporary arts, the latter has always been one of the St. Petersburg favorites that the city is famous for. Here, where literary magazines have been named after so-called “places of power” (some of which were aquatic what’s more), say, 37 or Obvodny Canal, and art groups have often been tied to specific toponymies, for instance, Nepokorennie Studio⁴ or Ozerki Artists’ Village, not to mention poets from the Malaya Sadovaya Street and artists from the Pushkinskaya-10 Art Center, choosing such an addressless name and yet taking up residence in

the very heart of the St. Petersburg cityscape appears as radical as renouncing one’s affiliations with a particular movement or tradition. But leaving its name aside (let it keep rolling), it is not so easy to find precedents in the St. Petersburg cityscape for the VOLNA artists (it is noteworthy that I have no desire to specify any genre predicates for this art collective? Activist group? Media cooperative?) VOLNA is neither *new*, nor *second*: It is in and of itself.

Instead, we have to seek these precedents outside St. Petersburg (and yet somehow connected to it), but let’s start first with some facts. VOLNA’s first appearances could be noticed in 2016 when the last fractions of street actionism, which had once been remarkably full-flowing (beginning with poetry and ending with dance) but then turned into scorched earth⁵ with Muscovites entering the field, were still burning themselves down – or smoldering rather. While Voina⁶ had flamed on before the genre burned out, VOLNA claims to have the opposite revitalizing influence, with

both elements being of a similar magnitude. The VOLNA collective’s team has also seen some members come and go, their site-specific works lay claim to being pieces of monumental art, and their artistic methods are of an interdisciplinary nature, but instead of the protest rhetoric, they embrace new technologies and “the language of numbers.” If “exploiting a rhetoric” (which is why performances were accompanied by wordy comments of the editor⁷ of a Russian *mat*⁸ dictionary) and impersonating unmercenaries (which, of course, was nothing but a massive hoax and a moral ultimatum) was considered good style in the early 2010s, then by the end of the decade most “creators of artworks” were people of very few words⁹ but exceptionally well qualified technical producers and commercial directors of their own projects. Which – as the artists have to explain nowhere but in the context of St. Petersburg destitution – allows to maintain “financial and aesthetic independence.” And, I should add, to avoid all kinds of murky situations in the gray zone of patronship and

1 Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005, p. 422.

2 Clarification: there still is, sort of, but instead they’ve established their own School of Engaged Art, where the collective mentioned next originates from.

3 For further details see my *Letters on Institutional Futility and Amnesia*, soon available in Russian as part of the project by syg.ma and the Portal blog. Their English version is expected to be published in a book from the Isolarii series by Common Era Books, NY.

4 My text written for the collective’s [exhibition](#) catalogue published by the Moscow Museum of Modern Art is available online in Russian: “[Nepokoryonnye, no povzroslevshie](#)” [“Unvanquished but Matured”]. The group is still active after having celebrated its landmark 10th anniversary.

5 For further details see the chronicle of the last days of street actionism in [my podcast made for Radio Svoboda](#).

6 Translator’s note: for more information about the Voina art group see <https://en.free-voina.org/about>.

7 Translator’s note: Alexei Plutser-Sarno, Voina’s media artist.

8 Translator’s note: Russian obscenities.

9 As the artists put themselves it, “The practice of collective creativity allows us to form a more objective view of the topic we are working on and to avoid excesses of individual reflection.”

curatorship that have nothing to do with exhibitions.

So, the exhibition in question reconstructs the audiovisual installations **NEUBAU** (2016), **Powerline** (2017), **Rotor** (2018), the light installation **Octave** (2018), the installation **Vague** (2019), and the kinetic light installations **Duel** (2019) and **Nymphéas** (2020). A more evident genealogy of the audio, light, and kinetic installations listed above shows through the genres and project names, which almost never resort to Cyrillic characters.¹⁰ If VOLNA could be called a *new wave* of something, then it would – obviously adjusted to the local context – be nothing less than the German Bauhaus. The phraseology of the texts accompanying VOLNA’s works only strengthens this hypothesis: “Despite the site-specific nature of the works, the overarching artistic principle behind all of them is the search for a universal language of pure forms. These forms, which correspond to the abstract subjects of the installations, are freed of excessive details, minimalist in their expressiveness and often even have a functional nature.”¹¹

The very possibility of such a breaking away from the history of art, which the functionalist aesthetics represents, traces back to the German tradition of *Kunstgewerbe*. It is hard to translate the word into the Russian context since the practice it signifies has no exact equivalent here (“art craftsmanship?” “applied arts?” “decorative arts?”) Accurately translating it into French is even more complicated, which can be explained by fundamental differences in the institutional histories of art of the two countries. Indeed, in France, crafts have on the one hand always coexisted with arts (see *Arts et métiers*) but on the other hand there has been a clear line of demarcation established between them institutionally,¹² and this is why a breakthrough to utilitarian, hand crafted, and then industrial manufacturing was not seen as a vector for the avant-garde shift. Meanwhile in Germany and the Soviet Union, artists often considered themselves merely the most qualified craftsmen in their guild.¹³

Naturally, there is less artistic narcissism in arts that deal with material substances – in architecture, for instance –

but the German emphasis on physically making something material goes well beyond it by bringing forward a new type of art workers or *Gestalter* (“conceiver of forms.”)¹⁴ Both the German and Soviet avant-gardes aspired to dissolve the autonomy and uniqueness of art in the common practice of creating an environment that paradoxically manifests all ambitions of “pure” art but is not concerned with its institutional value. As is clear already, VOLNA also insists on “a universal language of pure forms,” and these forms “often even have a functional nature that corresponds to the abstract subjects of the installations.”

If at the beginning of the 20th century “the nodal and most controversial point of the functionalist ideology was the abandonment of artisanal values in favor of industrial values, the substitution of an aesthetics of standardization for an aesthetics of the “hand crafted,”¹⁵ then a similar suspicion might arise due to the transition from industrial to post-industrial values and from an ambiguity in procedure for documenting performances (in “street” actionism) that has not yet fully revealed itself to-

ward the decisive role of virtual space in installations.

That said, among all the artists granted access to former industrial spaces (usually, in order to capitalize these spaces and then sell them)¹⁶ VOLNA is one of the few who do not ignore the industrial powers that are now out of the running and do not simply pay a tribute to them *thematically*, but rather trace a line – albeit dashed and curving¹⁷ – of what the function of these rooms, spaces, and environs could be if it were faithful to their history and geometry (**Powerline**). Moreover, some of their works (**Rotor**) engage directly with the technological melancholy of these “time machines.” However, instead of promising – or tediously debunking – prospects of a bright future, VOLNA focuses on the prompt installation of artificial (and often neon) light of post-industrial everyday life (**NEUBAU**).

Finally, the fact that, as the artists themselves note, “the primary expressive element in VOLNA’s work is light and... its interaction with space, as well as its movement” links these kinetic and “chiaroscuro scenarios” that “unfold

in relation to time” not only to German functionalism, but also to the German science of perception,¹⁸ which in its time also influenced many Soviet artists. In the middle of the 1920s, the connection between the Soviet Leningrad and the Weimar Berlin was so close it was almost as if there were a straight metro line between them. Punin, for example, insisted on opposing (the artistic) Culture to Civilization, which, for those with a sense for such tonal nuances, implies his obvious commitment to the German, not French, mindset.

Striving to influence people’s minds through form, sound, and color is typical for all of the 1920s, but it actually originates from the 1910s. Shklovsky’s psychotechnical formula stating that “the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself” that “must be prolonged,”¹⁹ which he proclaimed in the year of the revolution, can be considered to be the first example of this. However, constructivism would give this psychophysiology of avant-garde a new technological / rational twist. One can trace the geography how this interest spread as follows: Ladovsky got interested in the science

¹⁰ Translator’s note: the only work whose original title is written in Cyrillic letters is *Powerline* («ЛЭП»).

¹¹ *Website of the Keep Yourself Clean exhibition*.

¹² “...the Louvre and the Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers split up the name of art around a division that is not surprising in the West...: on the one hand, art as thought, model, example; on the other hand, art as technique, process, sleight of hand. Technicity, artisanal skill, and everything in the artist that alluded to the worker, even if to a worker of art, found itself inscribed in the French social system, in its institutions and in its ideologies, in a site other than that designated for art “properly speaking.”” Duve, Thierry de. *Pictorial Nominalism: On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 112.

¹³ For further details concerning the program of Soviet productionist art see Arvatov, Boris. *Art and Production*. London: Pluto Press, 2017.

¹⁴ Translator’s note: see Duve, Thierry de, p. 109.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The aforesaid article “*Nepokoryonnye, no povzroslevshie*” [“Unvanquished but Matured”] mentions an episode of this kind from the history of the Kransnoye Znamya (lit. Red Banner) factory, which was built by the constructivist Mendelson, as a real estate asset as well as a story of fighting against such “interpretation”.

¹⁷ Depending on which pole of the wave-particle duality we prefer.

¹⁸ For further details concerning it and its mutual coordination with art see Paul C. Vitz, Arnold B. Glimcher. *Modern Art and Modern Science: The Parallel Analysis of Vision*. New York: Praeger, 1984.

¹⁹ Shklovsky, Victor. “Art as Technique” in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. London: Longmans, 1988.

of perception through Kandinsky²⁰ (and thus through him and Wundt in gestalt psychology), but at the same time he would often visit the Department of “Organic Culture”²¹ run by Matyushin, who experimented with vision in augmented reality by using nothing but organic vision “tools.” While aiming to open their “doors of perception,” people in St. Petersburg were simply wandering around, whereas in Moscow, they developed an institutional and also material and technical base for it, prepared cost estimates and then filed reports, which allowed Ladovsky to establish his own laboratory and begin his experiments.²²

For Ladovksy, psychics was a function of vision and movement, which is why, first, he forced recipients of his architecture to move and, second, urged people to withdraw from their anthropocentric optics. Yet again, this widespread avant-garde motif refers to St. Petersburg perceptive millenarianism and the formalist call to see the world beyond learned analogies. But in Moscow constructivist laboratories, the focus shifted from measuring the world by human standards to a psychotechnically measurable man. Each time a person’s vi-

sion is amplified to a new level with the help of technology, it makes them very small at the same time. Copernicus was probably the first person to experience this with his telescope, which is why such shifts are often called “Copernican Turns” after him.

And yet, while constructivists advocated for a manufacturer’s perspective and a technician’s culture, Ladovsky would rather place the perception of the “user” at the center of his experiments, making space, and not materiality of a structure, his “medium,” which is precisely what makes his architecture absolutely indistinguishable from the social and technical tools used in cinema and, as a matter of fact, makes it vaguely resemble something from the 1960s – when space was not really produced anymore but rather was consumed and had a psycho-geographical influence on people. All of the above is very close to VOLNA’s emphasis on light and the way it moves through space as their main expressive means.

Over the past century and up to the “new twenties” (let’s see how roaring they will be), art has been attempting once again

to enter its dynamic phase through the use of light, kinetic scenarios and minimalistic forms combined with a practical approach to things, but with that it has transferred to a space that is more virtual – even more so than it already was in the 1960s and was predicted to be in the 1920s. This might seem artificial and constrained to anyone but the artists themselves, who from the very beginning have used light and space as settings for their psychotechnical experiments with perception. It seems like the VOLNA artists have always conceived their installations with a certain *gameplay* in mind, which also makes them heirs to the avant-garde utopianism and visionariness. The utopia of streets that shall be “our brushes” and squares that shall be “our palettes”²³ is, however, brought to life without even the slightest hint of passéism, transforming the real psychomotor conditions of today’s quarantine “imprisonment” into its materials, instruments and the space it originates from.

Switching to space and video games development tools with a self-explanatory name *Unreal Engine* not only makes it possible to “simulate real-time scenes”

and make visitors free to “choose any observation point,” but also makes the position of the recipients of VOLNA’s artwork paradigmatic for the entire art crowd and puts their installations into an even better position than the one they used to have in the “real world” that once existed.²⁴

This invasion of the institutional space, already marked by the name VOLNA, which does not have any sort of prehistory (unless we consider the *entire* German tradition of *Kunstgewerbe* and the *entire* history of avant-garde’s interaction with science of perception), is now evolving into a full-flowing psychotechnical odyssey. While other artists are being tormented by quarantine apathy and “talking heads” are passing from one “virtual room” to another, VOLNA is – just in case – contemplating the possibility of such a catacomb-like existence for art. In any case, we’ll have to keep ourselves clean no matter what light and kinetic scenario unfolds. Whether it’s the end of the world or the beginning of a movement towards something new.

20 Actually, after having been forced out of the VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios), Kandinsky opened the Department of Physics and Psychology at the State Academy of Artistic Sciences.

21 For further details concerning the history and various departments of the Leningrad State Institute of Artistic Culture, where artistic and material cultures were involved as well, see Kukui, Ilya. “Arkheologiya avangarda: o proiskhozhdenii materialnoi kultury iz yazyka” [Archeology of Avant-Garde: On Material Culture’s Deriving from Language]. *Translit No. 23, Materialnye kultury avangarda* [Material Cultures of Avant-Garde], 2020.

22 In 2017, the exhibition *Ladovsky’s Experiment* opened at the Gallery on Shabolovka. The project reconstructed the famous VKhUTEIN psychotechnical laboratory and devices for measuring students’ “spatial aptitude”, such as Liglazometr (“line-eye-meter”), Ploglazometr (“plane-eye-meter”), Oglazometr (“volume-eye-meter”), Uglazometr (“corner-eye-meter”), and Prostrometr (“space-eye-meter”). For more information about Ladovsky’s devices and experiments see Vöhringer, Margarete. *Avantgarde and Psychotechnics. On the Convergence of Science, Art and Technology in the Russian 1920s*. PhD dissertation, 2003.

23 Translator’s note: as proclaimed by Vladimir Mayakovsky in his poem *An Order to the Art Army*, 1918.

24 The artists’ comments on the reconstruction are notable as well: “The space of the virtual exhibition itself is heterotopic and at the same time proportional to the original exhibition locations. The model exhibits displayed inside it are as close as possible to their real prototypes and preserve their structural details, including the nature of the lighting and scenarios behind each of the live installations...For this reason, only works that were realized in the material world were selected for display. The exhibition is characterized by the presence of real space, living according to its own laws in another (virtual) space, as well as the merging of virtual and real spaces,” while “VOLNA’s preoccupation with seeking out reality and production processes is reflected in a simulated world.”

Keep Yourself Clean



VOLNA

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"Keep Yourself Clean" is the first programmatic art exhibition by VOLNA and reconstructs the art collective's main works spanning from the moment it was formed through the present in a virtual space. Visitors can move freely around the exhibition, selecting their own viewpoint and immersing themselves in the environment of each installation.

Since its formation in St. Petersburg, Russia in 2016, VOLNA has dedicated itself to light art and interdisciplinary art practices employing new technologies. The artists are known for their unusual exhibition formats, monumental installations and scenographic solutions for the electronic music scene. Throughout its four years of existence, VOLNA has maintained financial and aesthetic independence by creating 17 light installations and around 30 stage designs for festivals and performances.

Despite the site-specific nature of the presented works, the overarching artistic principle behind them is a purity of form and clarity in visual expression. The context and artistic task of each work is conveyed, first and foremost, through the language of form. The latter often turns out to be deceptively simple, refined during extensive detailing and minimalistic in its expressiveness, and thereby corresponds to the abstract ideological basis behind it. At the same time, for each abstract idea, be it a struggle between opposite forces, timelessness or

the fragmentation of memory, there is a very concrete image that provokes characteristic sensations. The image allows the viewer to get used to the installation environment and create the conditions for a deeply immersive interaction with the work. Work with form and image is subordinated to seeking out the quintessence of the sensation it evokes and reproducing this sensation through expressive means.

Many of the presented works are characterized by ornamentism, based on the principles of generative construction form in accordance with assigned parameters. This allows increasing the variability in form development almost without limit. Placed within this context, Sol LeWitt's phrase "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art" takes on a technological meaning, bringing the concept of art to the absolute of "self-assembled works." The works live in time and multiply their hypotheses according to proportions and rules set by the artists. These hypostases are not ephemeral: they represent the natural evolution of a work in real time.

In VOLNA's works, these expressive means originate in technology. Yet, despite falling under the aegis of "technological art," the technology itself is not the central focus of the artists' attention. The technologies they employ, whether innovative devices or tried and true electrical circuits, are simply a natural

NEUBAU

Audiovisual installation

An allusion to modernist architecture and its image of a future that never came and quickly became outdated. Its ambitious formal exploration and thoroughly thought out notions about how a bright future should look built were rejected by reality and forgotten like childhood dreams. NEUBAU is a utopian mode of existence embodied in life. It collapsed even faster than the children living in it grew up. Looking at the suburbs in Russian and Eastern European cities, known for their gloom and neglect, we attempt to colorize them with memories from childhood.

Using generative video content from minimalist geometric patterns, repeating elements and pure colors synchronized with an original soundtrack, we give expression to conflicted feelings of rejection and affection, combined with a dizziness from unfulfilled hopes.

Vertikal Gallery, St. Petersburg, 01-06.01.2016

PVC frames, suspension system, custom-designed software

3×3×15 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/neubau



Powerline

Audiovisual installation

The installation is inspired by the relics of industrial power and its potential, which remained unclaimed for many years. With the end of the industrial age, former factories fell into disrepair. Some of them housed small semi-legal businesses, while many turned into vandalized ruins. Powerline is a short circuit caused by these circumstances.

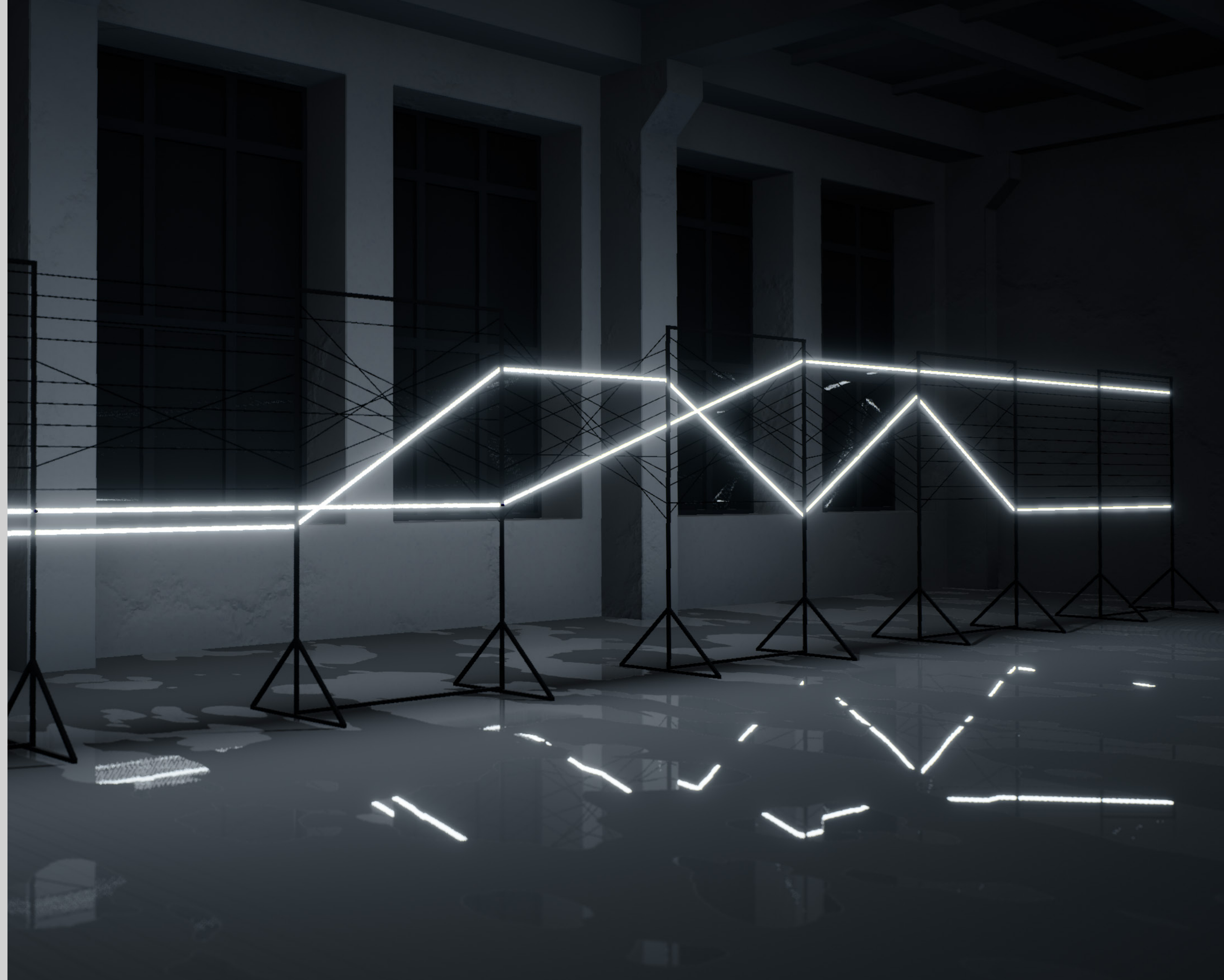
Driven by a generative beat structure, the visible lines create a throbbing 15 meter “voltaic arc” that fills the space with electric buzz and light.

Artplay Design Center, St. Petersburg, 22.04.2017

Electroluminescent wire, steel frames, custom-designed electronics and software, drum machine

15x0.7x2.2 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/powerline



Nymphéas

Kinetic light installation

The installation is inspired by lyrical images of ponds overgrown with water lilies, next to which poets and artists have spent countless hours pondering and contemplating, appealing to the clean cold flowers.

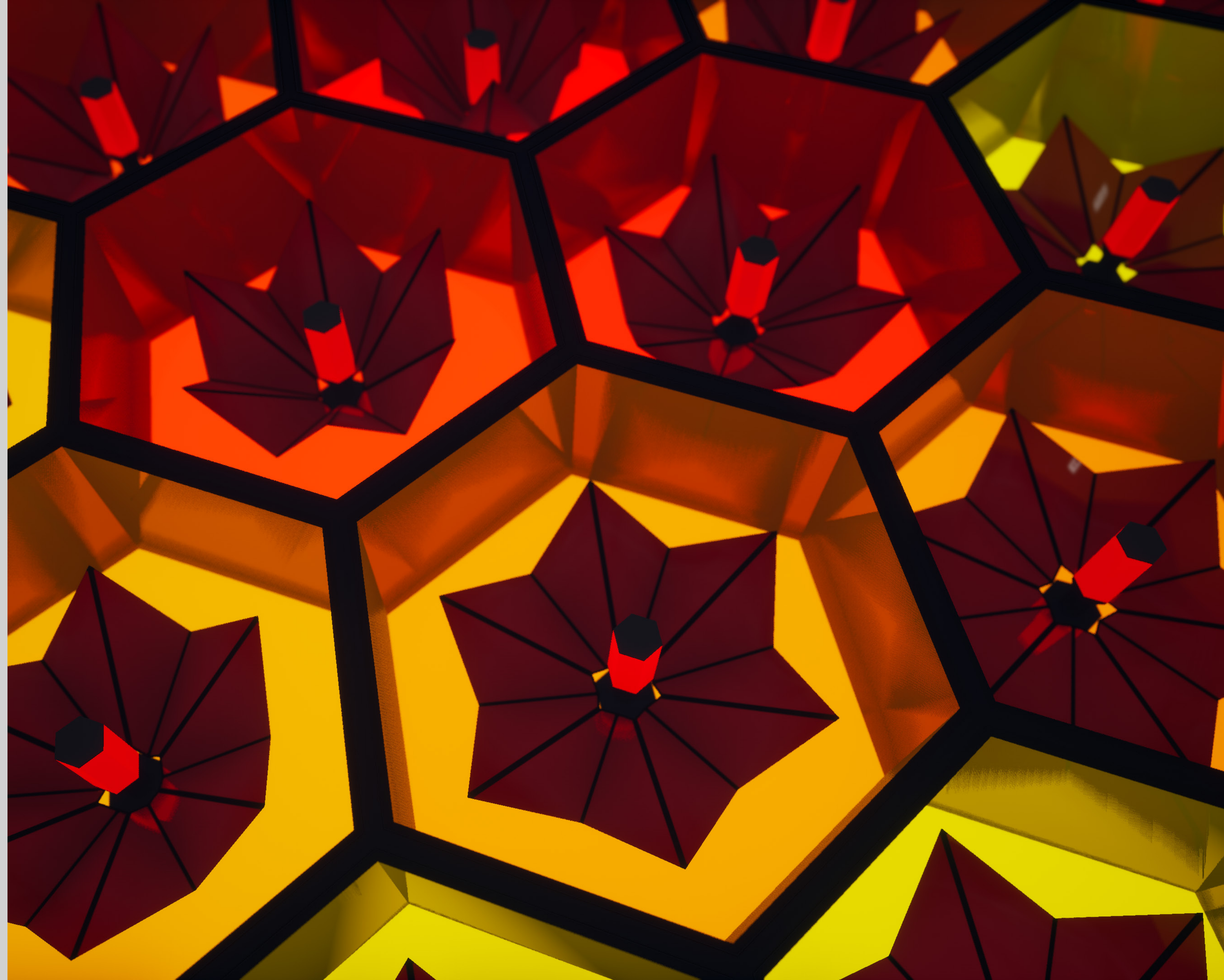
The flower buds move gently in an optically unlimited space, shimmering with different colors. The combined effect is that the reflections both of the flowers themselves and those observing them are multiplied, evoking a sense of pacification and submerging into the depths of this surreal pond.

St. Petersburg, since 31.03.2020

Motorized mechanical elements, LED strips, polyurethane, polystyrene, stainless steel, steel, aluminum, triplex glass, custom-designed electronics and software

4.85×4.85×0.6 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/nympheas



Rotor

Audiovisual installation

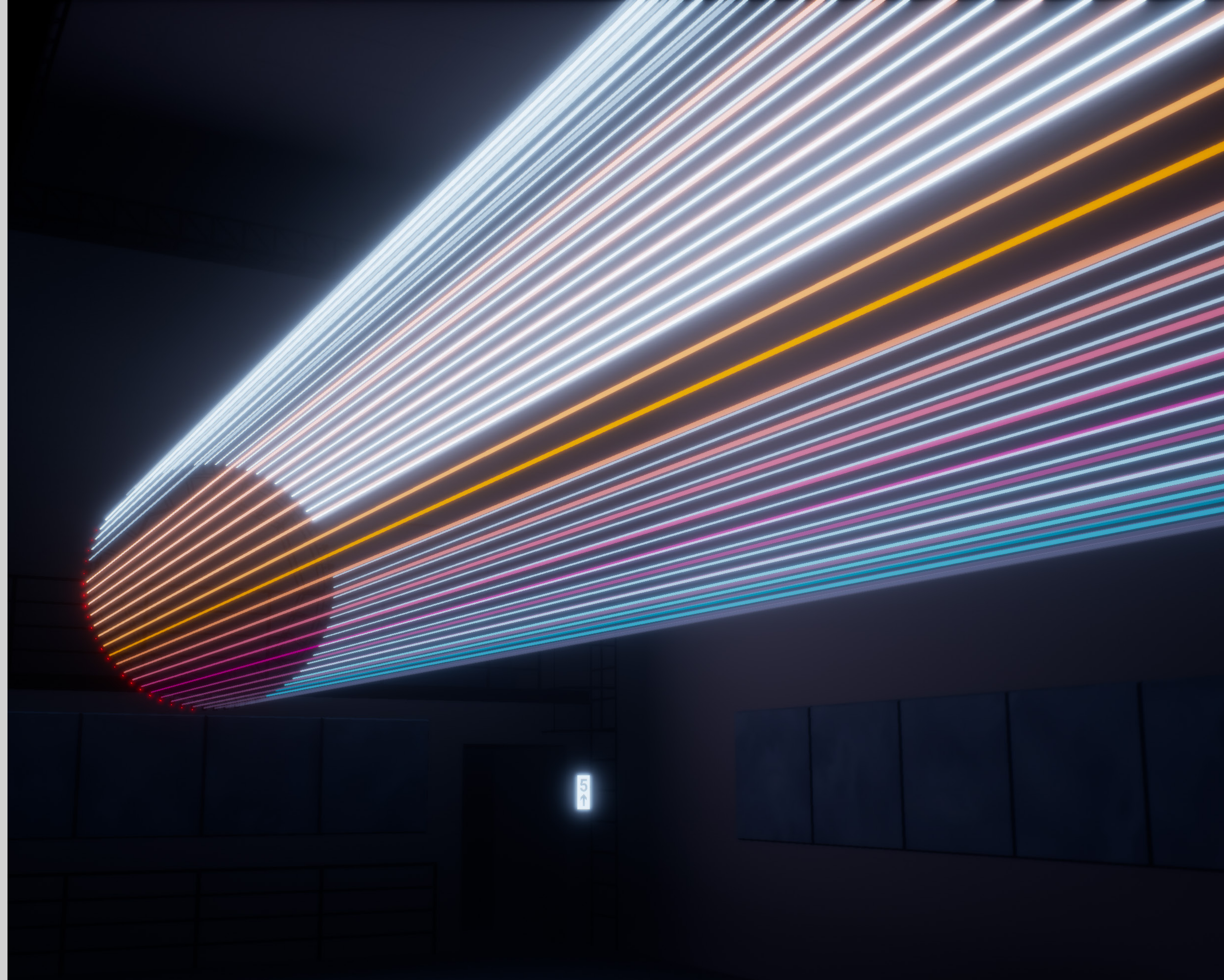
This installation is inspired by the Tipler time-machine concept, which is based on the assumption that an infinitely long cylindrical material volume rotating along its longitudinal axis could create warps in space and time, making time travel possible.

Continuous animations from an array of colored laser beams create a sense of spinning matter. The light animation was prepared in close interaction with sonic artwork that simulates rotation and the flow of energy through low-frequency rhythmic patterns mixed with high-frequency humming. This combination of light animations, audible sounds and inaudible vibrations creates a sensation of being isolated from the passage of time.

Spazio Impero Theater, Rome, 07-09.12.2018

RGB laser modules, steel frame, custom-designed electronics and software. Sound design: Sergey Kostyrko
2.2×2.2×18 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/rotor



Octave

Light installation

The installation was created for a concert hall located on the premises of a 200-year-old brewery in St. Petersburg. This site is where the city's trendiest beer is currently crafted, and the ancient vaults are lit up by the glare of animated lighting that serves as a back-drop to musical performances.

As a permanent stage setup, the installation includes a number of preset animations but is also designed to be versatile and built in a way that allows future VJs and light-engineers to use the installation as a low-resolution LED screen or a set of DMX-driven stage lights for live concerts and parties.

AF Brew Taproom, St. Petersburg, since 13.07.2018

LED stripes, steel tubes, suspension system, LED controller, custom-designed software

15×1.5 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/octave



Duel

Kinetic light installation

This installation takes inspiration from the idea that conflict can act as a driving force. Two opposites are in a constant state of “dueling” with each other, and all their attempts to reach one another result in continuous three-dimensional rotation.

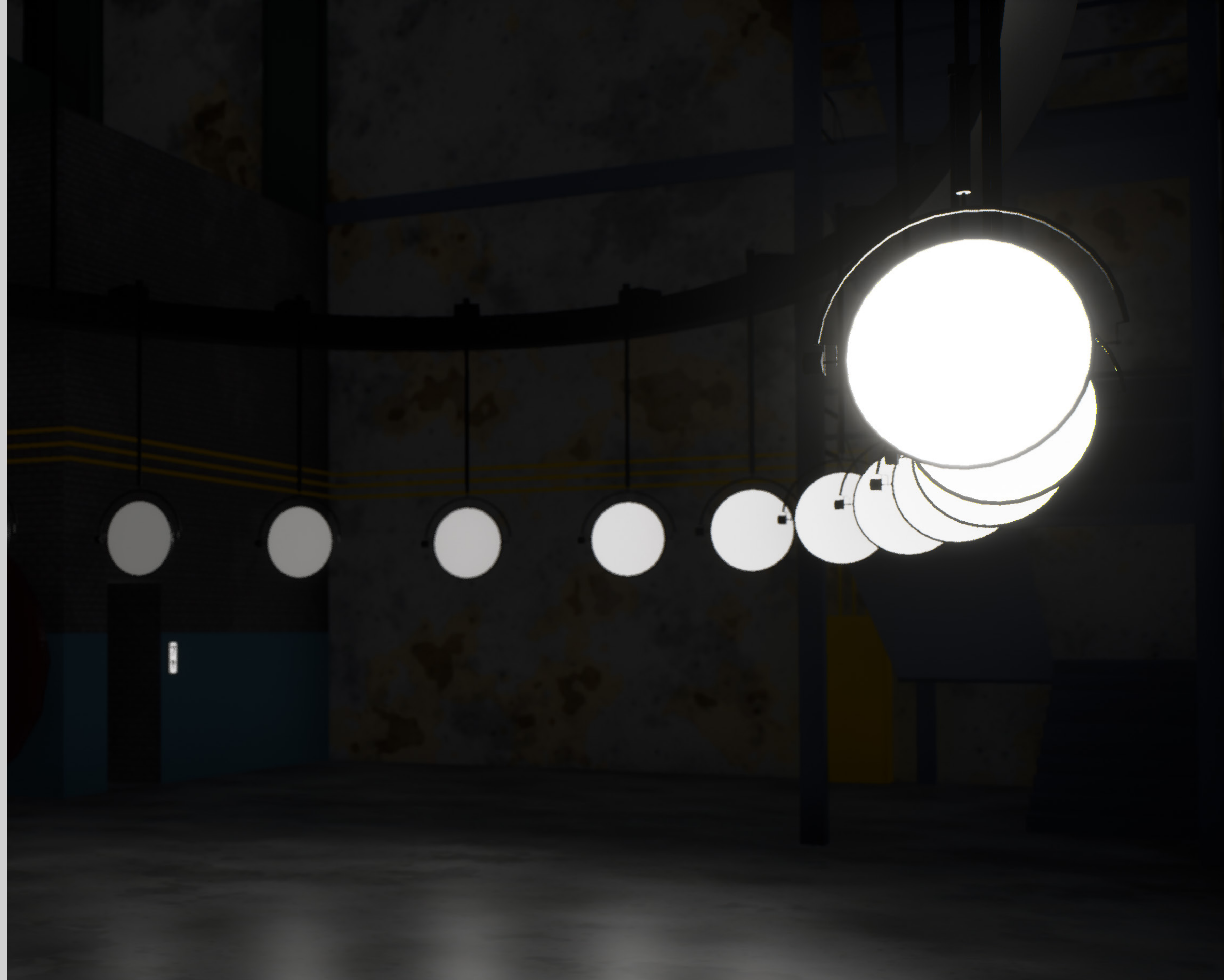
One recognizes in this movement the characteristic twists and turns of a coin that has been tossed into the air. The die has been cast, but the contest has not yet been decided. The discs’ movement through the air creates choreographed scenes with lights and shadows moving across space – the byproduct of a confrontation between two opposite and yet interconnected principles.

Sevkabel Port, St. Petersburg, 26-27.07.2019

Motorized light elements, suspension system, custom-designed electronics and software

11.2×10×2.7 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/duel



Vague

Installation

This deconstruction of a typical observation point represents the concept of homeland as an image in which some elements remain perpetually blurred and disparate. It is impossible to represent as a unified whole all the ideas and images that evoke a feeling of homeland. Instead, we conceive it as a combination of different independent parts of memories that when melded together create a shimmering image that usually exists only in our imaginations – as when you try to catch a memory in its entirety and bring it into focus, but can't.

Looking through plates of glass with constantly changing opacity, the viewer attempts to piece together the scattered fragments of a panoramic view of the Dolomites. This elusive feeling colors the panorama with subjectivity and transforms it into an unclear and faraway idea.

Fanes-Senes-Braies Nature Park, South Tyrol, 06.07.-
08.10.2019

PDLC glass, steel construction, solar energy collecting
panel, custom-designed electronics and software

2.1×0.4×1.8 m

www.volna-media.com/projects/vague



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