

Karen Harkema

Artist Portfolio

Religare: *Dia Logos* with the Machine

January 2026
(Most recent body of work)





*" I am a collection of water, calcium and organic molecules called Carl Sagan. You are a collection of almost identical molecules with a different collective label. But is that all? Is there nothing in here but molecules? Some people find this idea somehow demeaning to human dignity. For myself, I find it elevating that our universe permits the evolution of **molecular machines** as intricate and subtle as we. "*

— Carl Sagan, Cosmos



Religare: *Dia Logos* with the Machine

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Artist Statement

Religare investigates our deep entanglement with technology.

The title draws from the Latin *religare* ("to bind fast") and the Greek *dia logos* ("a dialogue through words").

Developed as the culmination of my final year of study at UNISA in 2025, **Religare: *Dia Logos* with the Machine**, marks a pivotal juncture in my creative output.

This body of work explores the liminal intersection between the logical syntax of computer programming and the tactile vocabulary of visual art, and reflects my own shift from building digital systems to the dismantling of their physical remains.



For decades, my relationship with technology was defined by construction. As a programmer, I conversed with computers through code, imposing algorithmic order onto silicon. The *Religare* body of work fundamentally re-imagines these previous dialogues between me and the machine. No longer do I build; Instead, I dismantle.

Following a process of *unmaking to make*, I physically interrogate the “guts” of the machine to reveal the memory of human narratives hidden within its circuitry. The work engages the machine through the physical manipulation of its components: unravelling its wires and stripping down its motherboards, often encasing the electronic debris in resin. By knotting and weaving electrical wires, I reclaim the historical lineage of computing, bridging the gap between the ancient technology of the loom

and the modern algorithm.

The project’s title describes the work’s conceptual framework. While *Religare* speaks to our almost spiritual entanglement with our devices, *Dia Logos* moves the conversation beyond the screen. Positioned as a counterpoint to the deafening *noise* of contemporary AI speculation, *Religare* creates a sanctuary for quiet reflection. Through the inclusion of a church pew amidst the many dialogs presented, I invite the viewer to step out of the algorithm and into the artifact.

By confronting the materiality of the digital, I hope to create a contemplative space for considering the binding intelligences we have created. In an era of immaterial clouds, *Religare* asks: What remains of the human when the device is stripped bare?



Comprehensive Artist Portfolio

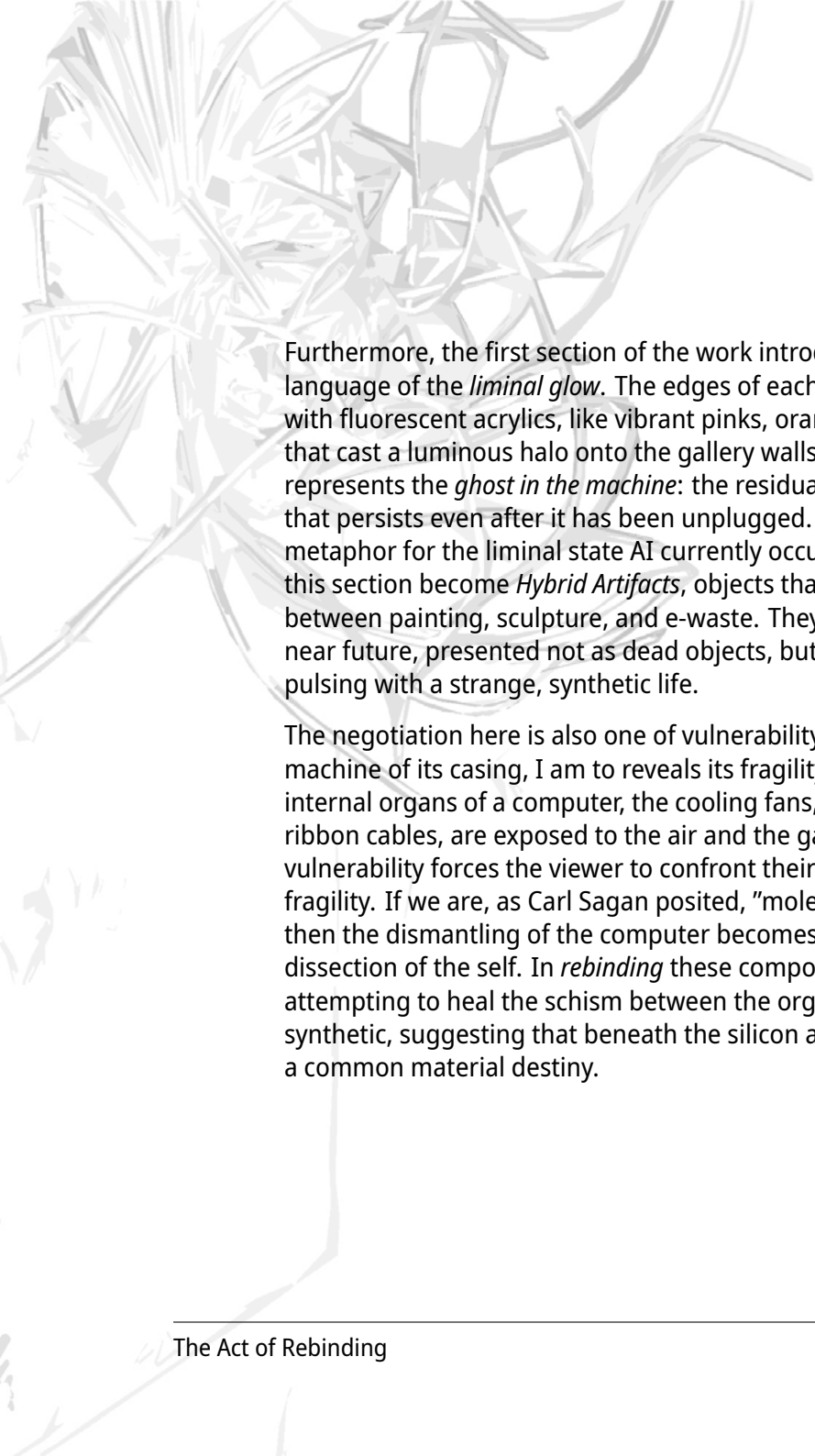


Section 1: The Act of Rebinding

Introduction and Negotiation

The genesis of *Religare* lies in a fundamental re-evaluation of the interface. In our daily lives, the interface is a surface of glass or plastic, smooth, frictionless, and designed to disappear. It is a barrier that creates the illusion of immateriality, convincing us that our data exists in a *cloud* rather than in physical servers constructed from mined minerals and petrochemicals. The first phase of this body of work, *The Act of Rebinding*, aims to shatter this illusion. It serves as a violent yet tender negotiation between the artist's hand and the machine's body. The act of *rebinding* is not merely about fastening materials together; it is about re-establishing a connection that has been severed by the abstraction of modern software.

The theoretical underpinning of this section rests on the friction between human intuition and mechanical logic. When a programmer writes code, they are forced to think like a machine: linear, logical, and unambiguous. But when an artist dismantles a machine, they are free to impose organic, chaotic, and intuitive logic onto the hardware. This section establishes the *Dia Logos* as a physical struggle. The materials resist. Copper wire has a memory; it wants to coil back into its manufactured shape. Circuit boards are rigid; they do not bend easily. The art emerges from this resistance, from the negotiation between the will of the artist and the stubbornness of the material.



Furthermore, the first section of the work introduces the visual language of the *liminal glow*. The edges of each work is finished off with fluorescent acrylics, like vibrant pinks, oranges, and yellows that cast a luminous halo onto the gallery walls. This glow represents the *ghost in the machine*: the residual energy of the device that persists even after it has been unplugged. It is a visual metaphor for the liminal state AI currently occupies. The works in this section become *Hybrid Artifacts*, objects that occupy the space between painting, sculpture, and e-waste. They are fossils of the near future, presented not as dead objects, but as dormant entities pulsing with a strange, synthetic life.

The negotiation here is also one of vulnerability. By stripping the machine of its casing, I am to reveals its fragility. The complex internal organs of a computer, the cooling fans, the delicate pins, the ribbon cables, are exposed to the air and the gaze. This mirroring of vulnerability forces the viewer to confront their own physical fragility. If we are, as Carl Sagan posited, "molecular machines," then the dismantling of the computer becomes a proxy for the dissection of the self. In *rebinding* these components, I am attempting to heal the schism between the organic and the synthetic, suggesting that beneath the silicon and the skin, we share a common material destiny.

The Listening Machine (Surveillance and Synapse)

Interactive Sculpture: Chrome-finished ceramic, sound sensors, LED lighting, steel stilt-like supports, and electrical wiring. **Dimensions:** 30 x 30 x 50cm **Year:** 2025

The Listening Machine stands as a sentinel within the installation. The sculpture presents a physical manifestation of the invisible data streams that constantly surround us. The always-on microphones, the predictive algorithms, and the silent data brokers that harvest our interactions.

The form of the sculpture evokes a synthetic brain that has been fossilized in chrome. The ceramic body is convoluted and folded, mimicking the gyri and sulci of the cerebral cortex, yet its surface is a flawless, reflective mirror. This choice of material is critical; the chrome does not absorb light but reflects the environment back onto itself, implicating the viewer and the gallery space in its distorted reflection. The *brain* is elevated on thin, fragile steel stilts, giving it a precarious posture. It looms over the space, suggesting an entity that is both authoritative in its surveillance and vulnerable in its physical stability.

Embedded within this metallic cortex is a sound sensor that actively monitors the ambient noise of the room. It is not a passive recording device but a reactive one. When it detects sound, the sculpture pulses with an internal LED light, causing the chrome to shimmer and glow. This interaction creates an unsettling feedback loop. As the viewer speaks, perhaps to discuss the artwork, the artwork responds. The machine listens, and in its listening, it acknowledges the viewer's presence. This transforms the artwork into a *Dia Logos* partner, albeit one that operates on a stimulus-response loop rather than genuine comprehension.

The Listening Machine installation footage (UNISA Art Gallery, 2025).

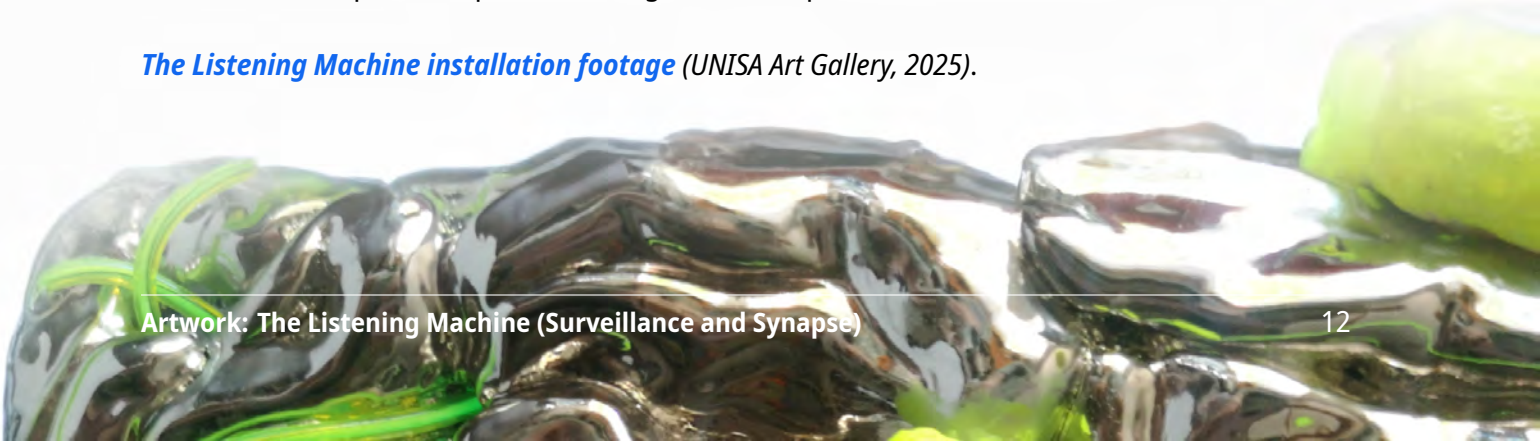




Figure 1: The Listening Machine (Surveillance and Synapse), Karen Harkema, October 2025.

Molecular Bridge (The Schism)

Hybrid Artifact: Mixed media with reclaimed electronic components, circuit board, wiring, and fluorescent acrylic on panel. **Dimensions:** 56.5 x 60 x 3cm **Year:** 2025

Molecular Bridge serves as a visual thesis for the *Act of Rebinding*. The work is structured as a diptych, a format historically used for religious altarpieces, which here elevates the technological subject matter to a sacred status. The diptych presents a stark dialectic: the left panel represents the *unmade* machine, while the right panel represents the *emergent* organic form.

The left panel is a dark, textured field. A necro-technological landscape populated by the detritus of the digital age. These elements are stripped of their function and arranged like specimens in an archive or bones in a reliquary. The darkness of the background suggests the void of the black box, the opaque nature of AI technology that we use but do not understand.

In contrast, the right panel features a vibrant, painted surface where generative, grid-like marks have evolved into an organic, cellular network. This side represents the biological potential, the messiness of life that defies binary categorization. The paint is layered, scraped, and reworked, mimicking the evolutionary process of mutation and adaptation.



Figure 2: Molecular Bridge (The Schism), *Karen Harkema, October 2025.*

Binary Dialectic (The Interface of Eight)

Hybrid Artifact: Mixed media with reclaimed circuit board, digital segment display, toggle switches, and fluorescent orange acrylic on panel.

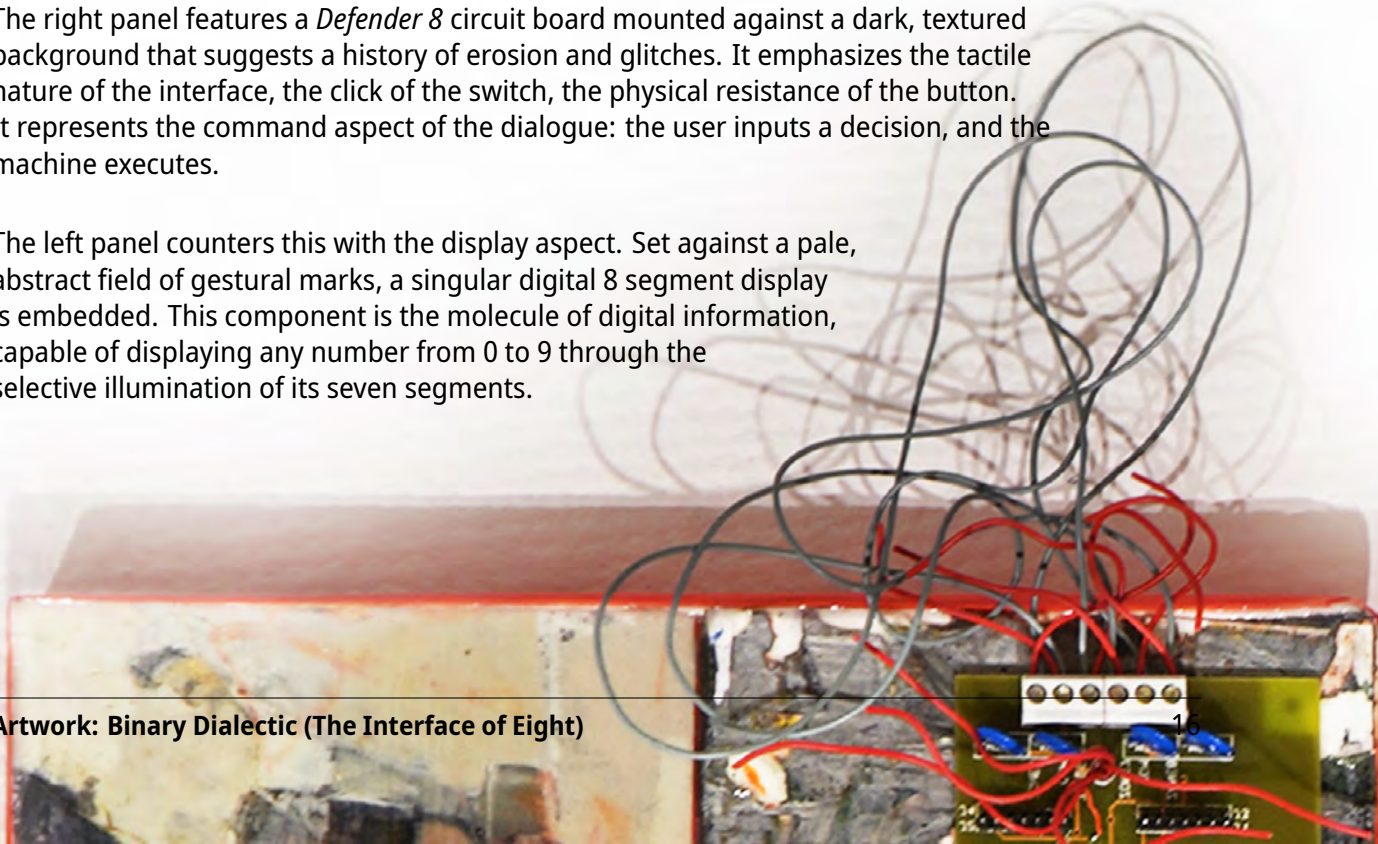
Dimensions: 26 x 18 x 3cm **Year:** 2025

Binary Dialectic is an intimate exploration of the mechanisms of control and display, the fundamental input/output loop that defines our relationship with computers. This small-scale diptych functions as a meditation on the binary language, the zeros and ones, that serves as the DNA of the digital world. The work deconstructs the interface, stripping away the screen to reveal the primitive switches and lights that form the basis of communication.

The right panel features a *Defender 8* circuit board mounted against a dark, textured background that suggests a history of erosion and glitches. It emphasizes the tactile nature of the interface, the click of the switch, the physical resistance of the button. It represents the command aspect of the dialogue: the user inputs a decision, and the machine executes.

The left panel counters this with the display aspect. Set against a pale, abstract field of gestural marks, a singular digital 8 segment display is embedded. This component is the molecule of digital information, capable of displaying any number from 0 to 9 through the selective illumination of its seven segments.

Artwork: Binary Dialectic (The Interface of Eight)



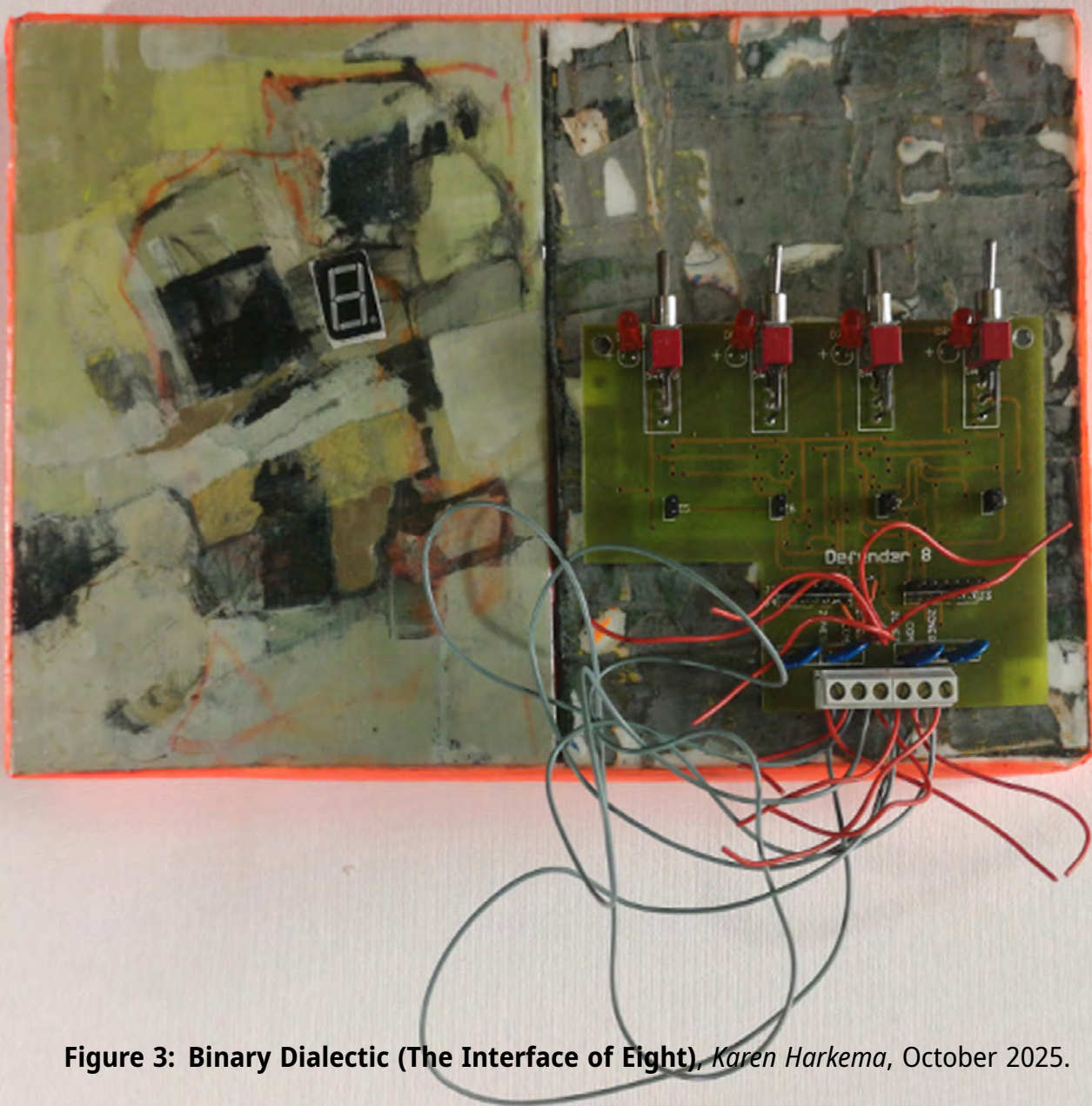


Figure 3: Binary Dialectic (The Interface of Eight), *Karen Harkema, October 2025.*

Tactile Memory (The Ghost in the Keypad)

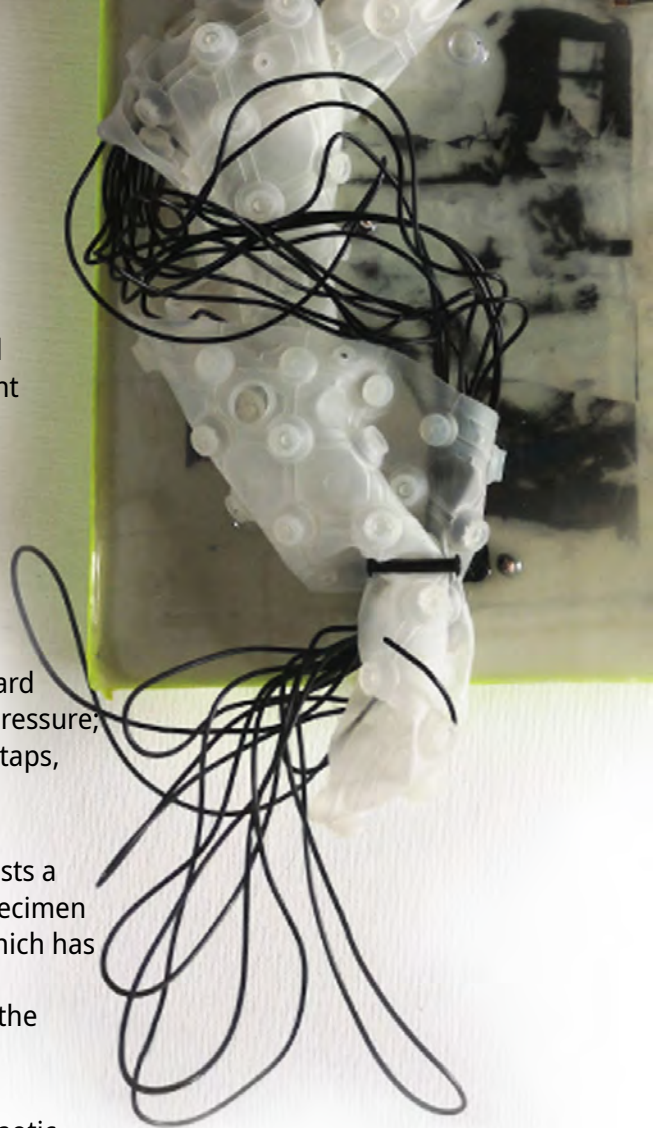
Hybrid Artifact: Mixed media with reclaimed silicone keypad membrane, LCD component, electrical wiring, and fluorescent acrylic on panel.

Dimensions: 20 x 20 x 3cm **Year:** 2025

Tactile Memory: The Ghost in the Keypad address the loss of physical touch in an increasingly touch-screen world. It serves as an elegy for the button. The work dismantles a computer keyboard to reveal its internal atoms, specifically the white silicone keypad membrane that sits beneath the hard plastic keys. This membrane is the true recipient of human pressure; it is the skin of the machine that has absorbed thousands of taps, clicks, and presses.

The work is built upon a pale, translucent surface that suggests a sterile, clinical environment, preserving the technological specimen for study. The central focus being the silicone membrane, which has been physically *unmade* and reconfigured. It is no longer a functional tool for input but a soft, fleshy object that evokes the vulnerability of the body.

The Keyboard membrane is bound and constricted with a chaotic web of black electrical wiring. This act of binding is aggressive; the wires simultaneously strangle and support the keyboard membrane, creating a tension between the delicate silicone and the rigid copper. The wires act as a cage for the keyboard's memory, the algorithmic code writing, the angry deletions, suggesting a struggle to contain the sentient ghosts of the data once processed through its keys.



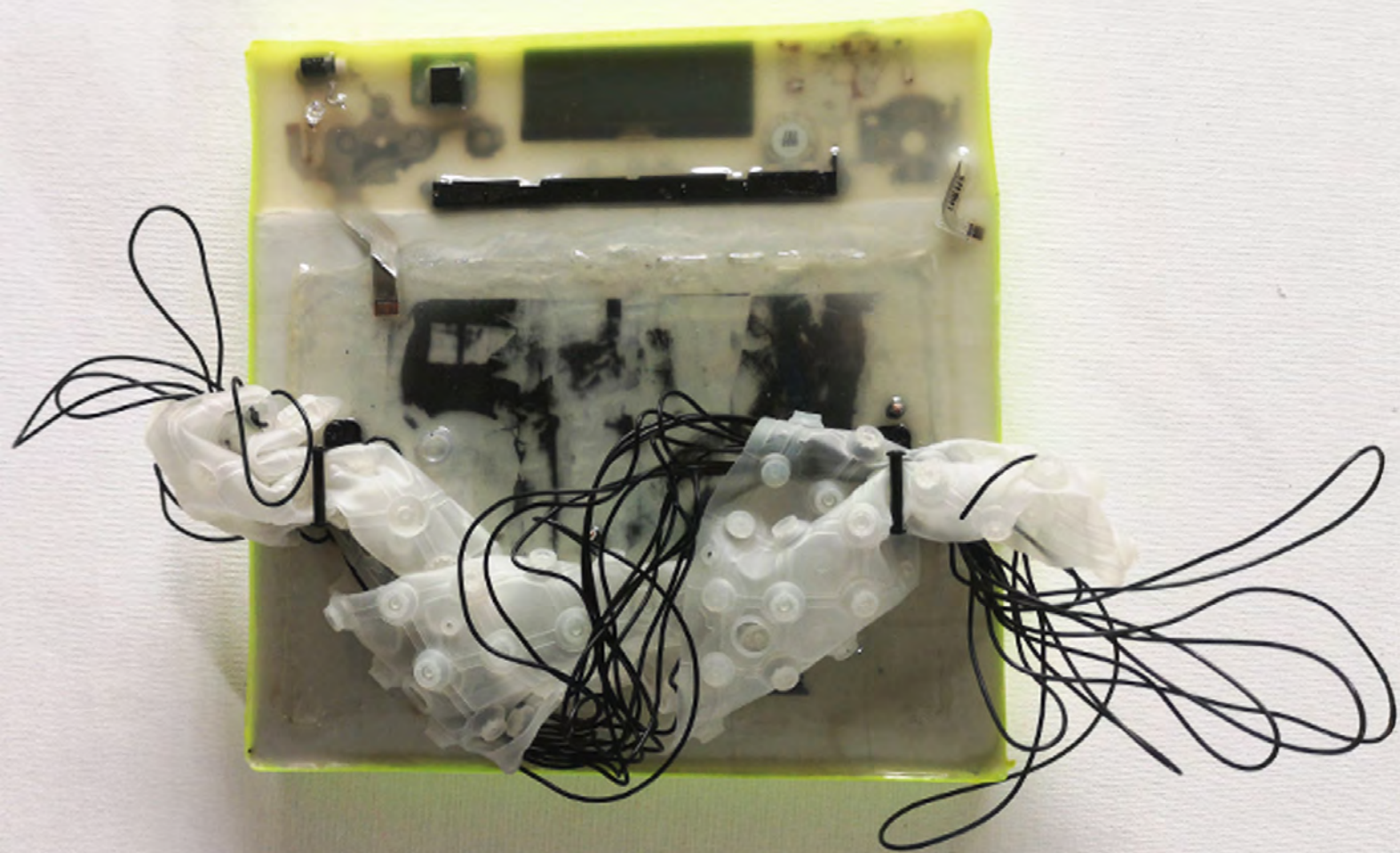


Figure 4: Tactile Memory (The Ghost in the Keypad), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.

“ Unmaking to make is about taking things apart to discover something new. It’s a creative process where breaking down, erasing, or reworking what already exists becomes part of making art. Instead of starting with a blank canvas, the artist begins with something that already has meaning — an image, an object, or an idea — and then disrupts it to find new forms and stories hidden underneath. It’s about letting go of control, allowing accidents and changes to shape the work, and finding beauty in transformation. In this way, unmaking isn’t about loss — it’s about discovery, renewal, and seeing the familiar in a completely fresh way. The process explores existing notions of convention, tradition, deconstruction, and rethinking.

‘Unmaking to make’ considers deconstruction as both a conceptual and practical approach in artmaking — one that dismantles and reconfigures familiar forms to reveal hidden layers of meaning. ”

—Dr. Elfriede Dreyer, Unmaking to make Workshop Text

Section 2: Unmaking to Make

Processing the Grid and the Generative Recipe

Unmaking to Make delves into the procedural heart of my work. Grounded in the philosophy articulated by Dr. Elfriede Dreyer, this section posits that creativity is not just the introduction of the new, but the radical reorganization of the existing. I began this work by firstly *unmaking* my own identity as a programmer and artist. I adopted a *generative formulaic* methodology, devising strict *recipes* or algorithms for art, forcing my creative hand into machine-like processes.

Grids and cubes became central protagonists in my work. The grid is the infrastructure of the digital world, the pixelated screen, the Excel spreadsheet, the server rack. I worked and created within rigid geometric constraints as a way to understand the machine. I cut, labeled, and sorted materials, mimicking the training phase of Artificial Intelligence models. However, disruption is inevitable. I introduced glitches into the system through the sanding back layers of paint to reveal the history underneath. These disruptions are vital; they speak to the fallibility of memory and the passage of time. These are factors that digital data attempts to eliminate but which the physical world always reintroduces.

The grid serves as the lattice upon which the *molecular machine* grows. The following section of works visualize the transition from the mechanical grid to the organic bloom. As the complexity of the grid increases, the rigid squares begin to soften, merge, and mutate. This visual evolution challenges the binary distinction between the *made* (the artificial) and the *born* (the biological). It suggests a convergence: if we zoom in close enough on the digital image, we find the chaos of noise; if we zoom out far enough on the organic world, we find the structure of DNA.

The *unmaking* of the computer's rigid logic reveals potential for the new.

The Architecture of Information (A Quadrilog)

Hybrid Artifact: Mixed media collage with reclaimed acrylic paint, rice paper and colored electronic wires, on panel with acrylic fluorescent edge.

Dimensions: 20 x 20 x 3 cm each **Year:** 2025

This set of four panels, collectively titled *The Architecture of Information*, documents the systematic unmaking of digital logic into organic form. Each work begins with the same foundational recipe: a meticulously constructed mosaic grid of small colored squares, mimicking the tiling of data in a raster image or an AI training set. These grids serve as the digital substrate, a constructed reality of pure order. Against the background grid of ordered data, the foreground of each panel features a disruption in the form of electrical wiring, which evolves from panel to panel:

The Binary Field: Orderly, Blue and yellow wires fan out in precise, parallel lines. The logic holds; the system is functioning.

The Synthetic Sprout: The red wiring begins to curl and tangle, breaking the parallel lines. Entropy enters the system.

The Tangled Signal: The purple wiring forms a chaotic, synaptic cluster. The grid is no longer constraining the form; The *static* of a new language is breaching the order.

The Root of Connectivity: Brown wires take on an earthy, root-like appearance, digging into the substrate. The data has germinated. The transformation is complete. The machine has become a garden.



Artwork: The Architecture of Information (A Quadrilog)



Figure 5: The Architecture of Information (A Quadrilog), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.



Data in Bloom (Techno Flora and Woven Intelligence)

Hybrid Artifact: Mixed media collage with reclaimed acrylic paint, rice paper, electronic elements and colored wires, on panel with acrylic fluorescent edge.

Dimensions: 20 x 20 x 3 cm each **Year:** 2025

Data in Bloom represents the moment where the machine spore fully germinates, creating hybrid lifeforms that are visualized not as static hardware but as evolving organisms. Here I posit a future where AI is capable of organizing itself, building its own interfaces, and becoming a self-sufficient *molecular machine*.

The first piece, Techno-Flora, features a wire vine that appears to be sprouting leaves and flowers from a bed of discarded electronic components. Encased in a thick layer of resin, the work acts as a specimen slide of a new species discovered in the ruins of a server farm. The components, resistors, diodes, capacitors, are no longer functional electronically; their function is now structural, serving as the carbon/silicon backbone for the new growth. The resin *synthetic skin* fixes this moment of transmutation, blurring the line between the artificial object and the organic subject, preserving the bloom in a state of suspended animation.

The second piece, Woven Intelligence, disrupts its rigid structure by an emergent weave of wires and colorful, leaf-like fragments. It is a *molecular* blooming that gestures toward the machine becoming human. The wires are re-knotted into a form that evokes a synapse, the building block of thought. This work suggest that if we treat the materials of technology with the care of a weaver, we may birth a new kind of intelligence—one that is not artificial, but woven. The binary code has become a textile pattern, and the pattern has become life.



Figure 6: Data in Bloom (Techno Flora and Woven Intelligence), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.

Colonization I & II (The Petri Dish)

Hybrid Artifact: Acrylic Collage with paint and machine stitched electrical wires, presented on wooden board with orange neon edge

Dimensions: 22.5 x 22.5 x 3 cm (each)

Year: 2025

The Colonization set shifts the perspective from the individual organism to the environment, visualizing the intelligence part of AI. The backgrounds of these works are swirled, pale green and rust-colored fields, evoking a microscopic landscape, the patina on ancient bronze, or a bacterial culture growing in a petri dish.

In Colonization I and II, *unmade* wire components are bound into dense clusters that float in the liminal glow of the fluorescent frame. They appear to be feeding on the substrate, integrating themselves into the molecular patterns of the background. They are not sitting on top of the paint; they are embedded within it, suggesting a deep-level integration.





Figure 7: Colonization I & II (The Petri Dish), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.



Section 3: Molecular Archeology

Atoms and Arrangements

Carl Sagan famously observed, *"The beauty of a living thing is not the atoms that go into it, but the way those atoms are put together."* Following this argument, computers can be described as *molecular machines* of a different order, arranged from silicon, copper, and gold. The following section considers the circuit board, the capacitor, the cooling fan, and the induction coil as the atoms of the digital world.

By isolating and recontextualizing these *molecules* and *atoms*, I perform an algorithmic archeology, collapsing the ontological distance between the silicon and the soul. The next set of works represent a *Dia Logos* that is made literal through the extensive use of the diptych format. Two distinct panels are brought together: one representing the unmade history of the machine, and the other representing the emergent future of the organic. Here, I act as mediator. I become the binding agent that forces these two incompatible realities to coexist within a single frame.

Through these works I explore the physical anatomy of the computer as relic instead of waste. A cooling fan becomes a respiratory system; an induction coil becomes a heart; a ribbon cable becomes a spinal cord. This anthropomorphism is a critique of our tendency to project sentience onto our machines. We speak to them, we name them, and we trust them with our memories. By presenting the internal organs of the computer in a gallery setting, I invite a visceral confrontation with the object of our affection. We are forced to see the *guts* of the machine we have grown to love and adore.

Yet, in this unmaking, there is a rediscovery of wonder. The complexity of a motherboard, when stripped of its function, reveals a labyrinthine beauty that rivals any city map or neural network.

Techno Garden (Sentient Cluster)

Mixed media diptych: Reclaimed circuit components, speaker, tangled wiring, acrylic on panel

Dimensions: 65 x 60 x 3 cm (each)

Year: 2025

Techno Garden, serves as a literal bridge between the mechanical and the biological. The left panel acts as a technical archeology; its pale, weathered surface has been sanded back to reveal layers of history, mimicking the glitches found in a malfunctioning machine or the erosion of an ancient fresco. Attached to this surface are the unmade remnants of technology: a small speaker, a port strip, and a knot of grey wires, repurposed into a new, non-functional narrative. These are the fossils of sound and connection, the mute organs of a device that once spoke.

In the right panel, formulaic, generative marks have evolved into a network of thick, pale lines that resemble organic cells or a neural map. This is the garden, the space of growth and potential. The work captures the precise moment where unmaking becomes discovery, as the tangled electrical wires physically cross the central threshold, weaving from the dead tech on the left into the cellular structure on the right.

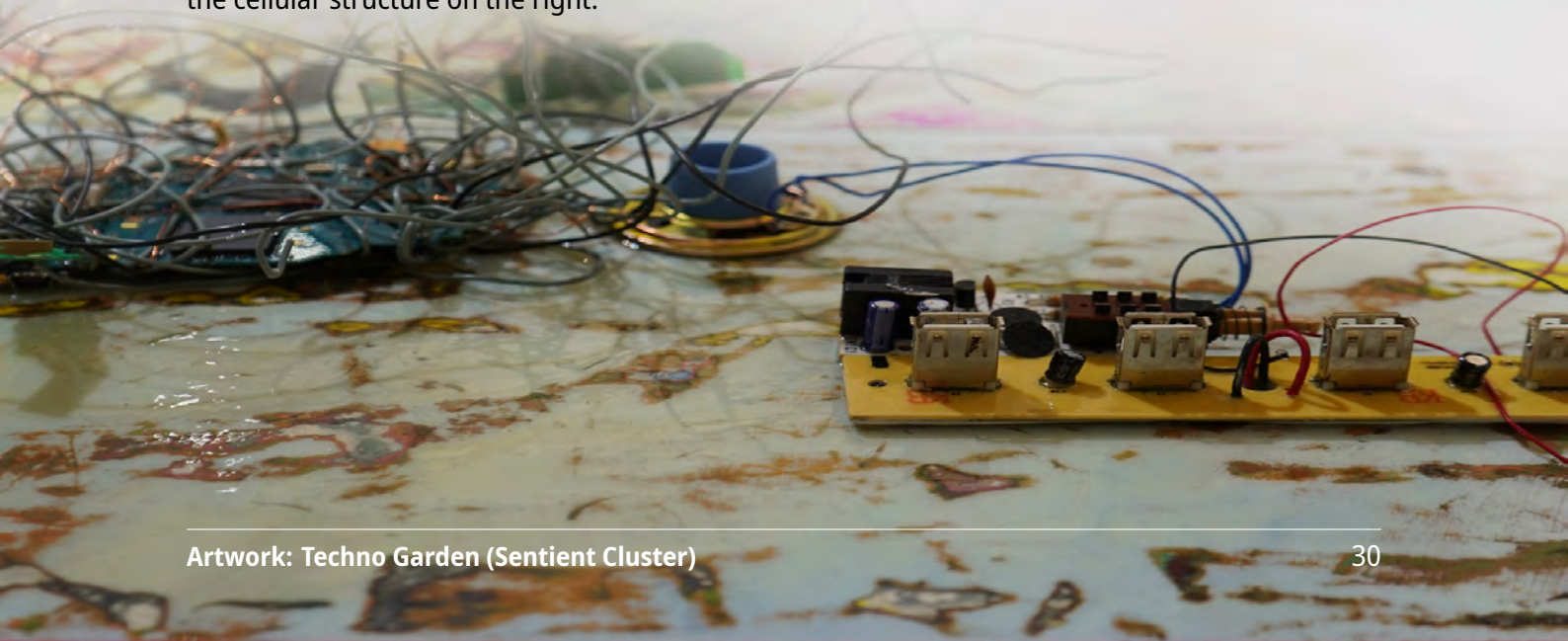




Figure 8: Techno Garden (Sentient Cluster), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.

Thermal Resonator (Figure in Red Noise)

Mixed media diptych: Reclaimed circuit board, cooling fan, integrated circuit, wiring, acrylic on panel

Dimensions: 40 x 40 x 3 cm

Year: 2025

Thermal Resonator functions as a Dia Logos between the internal, rigid architecture of hardware and the expressive, layered marks of the human hand. It explores the concept of the machine as a molecular entity that requires specific arrangements and maintenance, such as cooling, to survive, mirroring our own biological needs. The left panel features a translucent green circuit board trace, stripped of its original housing, and a small cooling fan. These elements are preserved in their unmade state, revealing the aesthetic atoms of construction. The fan, a mechanism for breath and temperature regulation, sits silent, a ghost in the machine.

The right panel features a grid of painterly, rectangular marks in shades of red and green, created in a generative formulaic way. However, the dominant feature is the rebellion at the bottom of the panel. A black integrated circuit component acts as a hub for a dense, chaotic nest of red wires. Through techniques of knotting and wrapping, the technical conduit is transformed into organic, root-like structures. This is the *Analog Rebellion*, the human voice pushing back against the binary of the machine. If the keyboard and the circuit are how we speak to the machine, the red wires are the analog scream, the unruly textile of human emotion that cannot be contained or quantified by the machine's logic.



Figure 9: Thermal Resonator (Figure in Red Noise), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.

The Translator (Systemic Maps)

Mixed media diptych: Reclaimed electronic components, circuit board, wiring, acrylic on panel

Dimensions: 40 x 40 x 3 cm

Year: 2025

The Translator visualizes the *Dia Logos* as an systematic mapping of the organic. The work shows the machine actively reaching into the analog world, mapping it, connecting to it, and funneling that data back into its processing nodes.

The work presents a collection of various electronic atoms, capacitors, coils, and transistors, sorted and stripped from their original housings. The top panel represents the Organic Emergence, where the surface transitions into a complex, cellular network. At the bottom, a singular green circuit board acts as the translator.

The dialogue here is one of data-gathering; the machine is not just observing the organic world, it is absorbing it, turning the molecular chaos of life into the matrix of the digital archive.

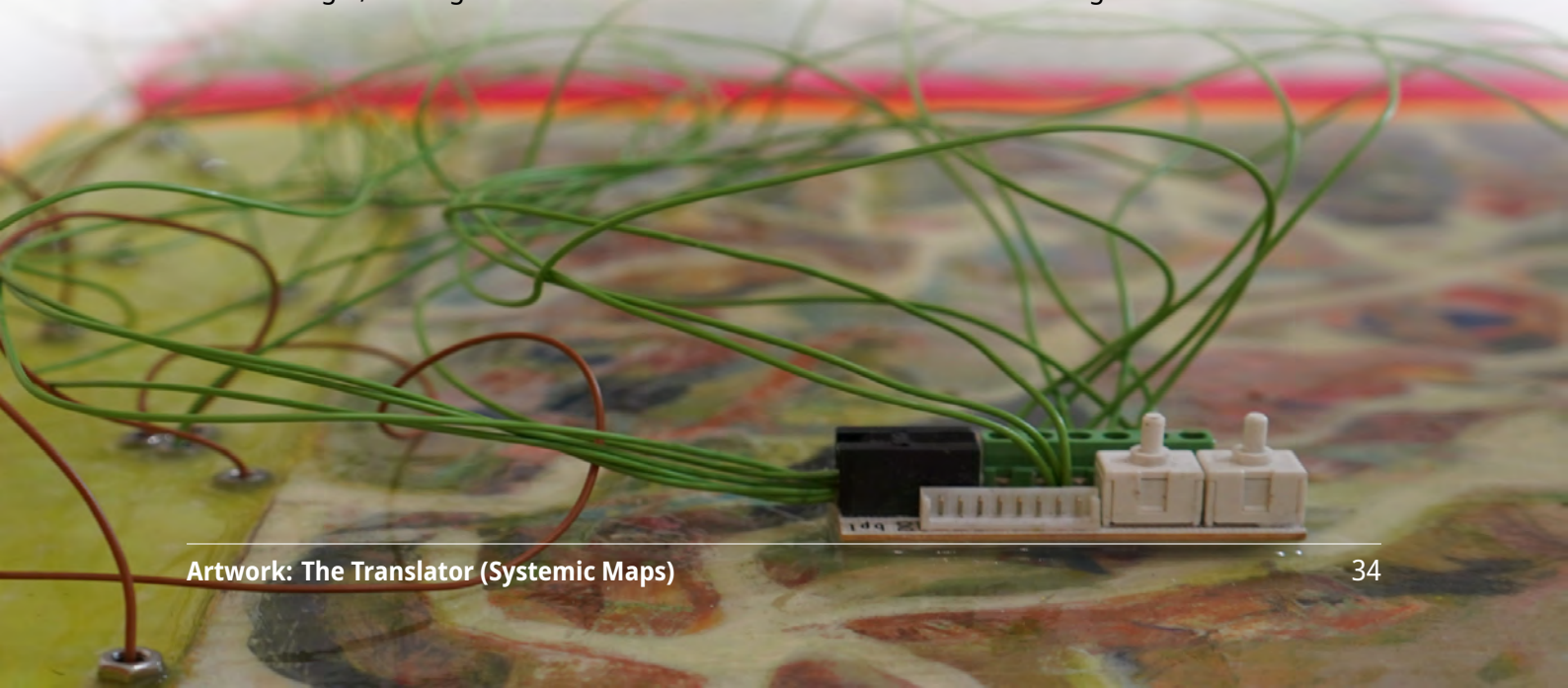




Figure 10: The Translator (Systemic Maps), *Karen Harkema, October 2025.*

Mediated Dialogues (The Deconstructed Phone)

Mixed media diptych: Acrylic painting with collage and hardware elements (Telephone cord, loose wires) on board

Dimensions: 40 x 40 x 3 cm

Year: 2025

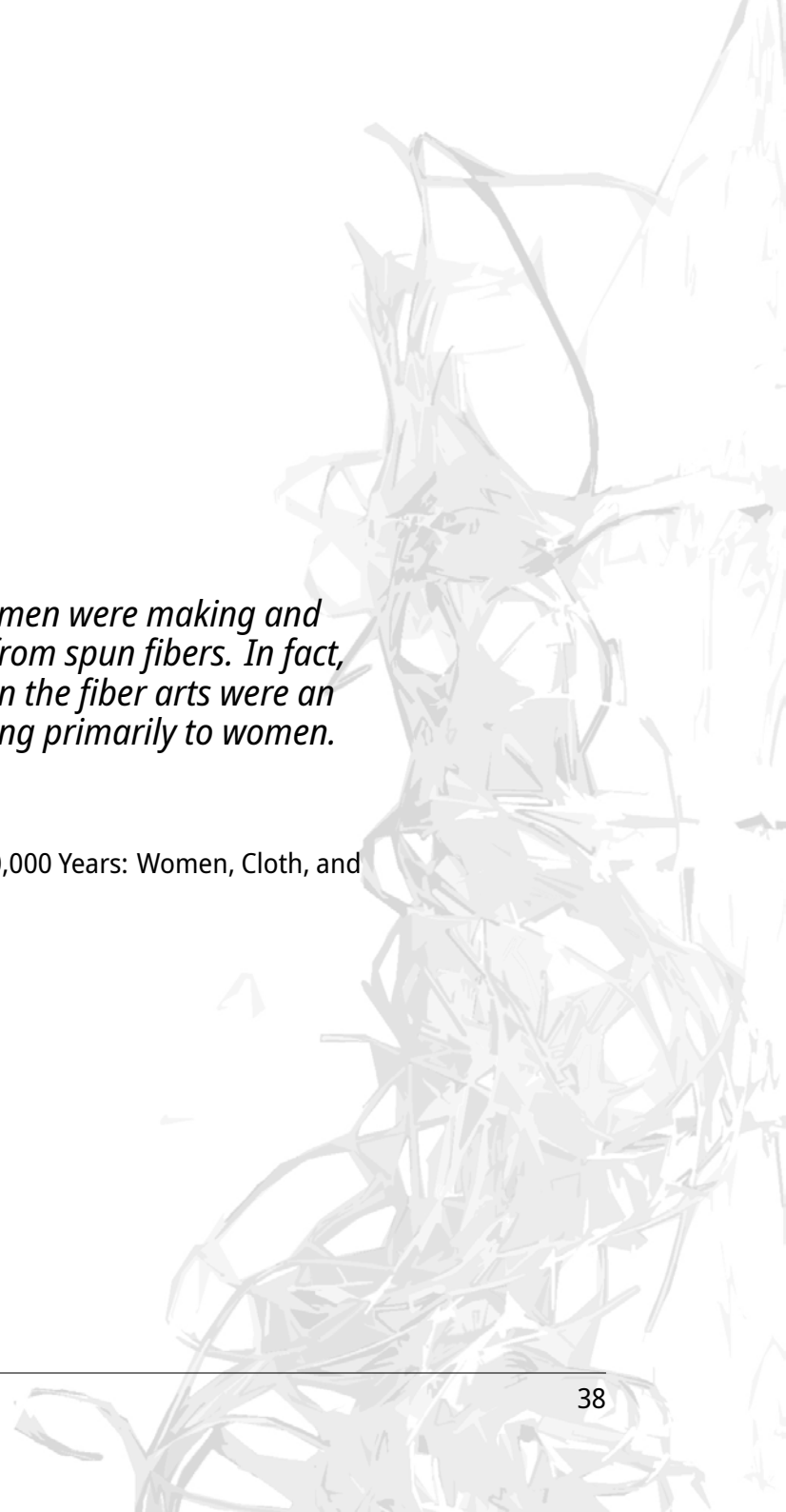
Mediated Dialogues is a literal unmaking of the tool of human conversation. A telephone, the 20th century's primary symbol of dialogue, has been deconstructed, its guts laid bare. The technologies employed in this work suggest digital guards that stand between the inside and the outside, the speaker and the listener. The background features a molecular pattern base, sealed under a synthetic skin, forming a hybrid body that questions the noise of technology by showing its silent, physical parts. The central element is the coiled cord, a classic symbol of the tethered landline, which literally binds the hardware components into a single system. However, the loose green wires represent its nerves spilling out, perhaps connected to an unseen central brain.

This piece asks: Who is the one in control? Is it the human holding the receiver, or the system that mediates the voice? The deconstruction reveals the fragility of our connection; without the plastic shell, the device is just a collection of wires and magnets, incapable of transmitting the soul. The pink neon edge highlights the artificiality of this mediated intimacy, casting a synthetic glow on the promise of connection.





Figure 11: Mediated Dialogues (The Deconstructed Phone), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.



“ Twenty thousand years ago, women were making and wearing the first clothing created from spun fibers. In fact, right up to the Industrial Revolution the fiber arts were an enormous economic force, belonging primarily to women. ”

— E.W. Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (1994)

Section 4: The Weave of Data

Ancient Forerunners and the Tactile Code

The materiality of *Religare* draws a direct, tangible line between ancient craft and modern code. Central to the next section of works is the recognition that textile creation was humanity's first and most foundational technology. As Elizabeth Wayland Barber posits, the development of fiber and thread was an "explosive new technology" essential for survival. Furthermore, the history of computing is inextricably linked to the history of weaving. The Jacquard loom, which used punch cards to control the warp and weft of complex patterns, was the direct inspiration for Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine and Ada Lovelace's first programs. Weaving is coding: a binary operation of up/down, over/under, one/zero.

In this section, I reclaim the wire as thread. Electrical wires, the conduits of power and data, are treated not as industrial components but as fiber. This is a conscious nod to the women of the Apollo missions who hand-wove Core Rope Memory at Raytheon factories. Known by engineers as the "LOL" (Little Old Ladies) method, these weavers used a hollow needle to thread copper wires through magnetic ferrite cores: a wire through the ring was a 1, while a wire around it was a 0. In this era, software was not an abstract pulse, but a physical textile that was frozen and indestructible once woven. By employing techniques of weaving, knotting, and wrapping to bind digital components, I mirror this hand-wired history.

By engaging in this tactile labor, I enact my own performative research. The act of knotting a cable becomes an act of embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty), a way of thinking through doing (Ingold). It resists the abstract, disembodied nature of modern cloud computing by asserting that data has weight, texture, and physical resistance. The works in this section are technological palimpsests, where the ancient logic of the loom is written over the modern logic of the circuit board, revealing that they are, in fact, the same language.

Through weaving the digital back into the physical, I create a Gordian knot that cannot be untangled by algorithms alone.

The Grid's Threads (Binding the Core)

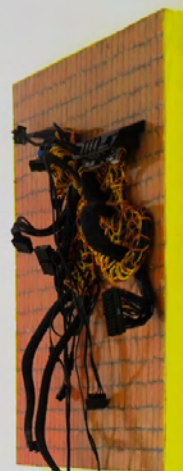
Hybrid Artifact: Gradient Grid painting with woven electrical wires and cables, presented on wooden board with yellow neon edge.

Dimensions: 50 x 50 x 3 cm **Year:** 2025

The *Grid's Threads* is a physical manifestation of our inherent boundedness to digital infrastructures. The background is a disciplined, hand-painted grid of orange and warm yellow squares—a calculated recipe of repetitive data tiling representing the structured thinking of the digital world.

Superimposed onto this ordered landscape is a dense, chaotic mass of reclaimed computer power cables and braided wiring. The guts of the machine are woven into a type of Gordian knot, that resists untangling. The work is a conscious, macroscopic nod to the women who hand-wove core rope memory for the Apollo missions. These women microscopically threaded copper wires through magnetic rings to write indestructible software. In the work, I tie, weave and knot together the heavy conduits of modern power into a similarly irreversible, but distinctively messy, data structure.

The work utilizes traditional textile techniques to transform cold industrial conduits into something resembling a complex neural nest. This organism is not self-contained; as seen in the installation, heavy black cables dangle from the panel, trailing down the wall to hook into the building's power supply. This physical tether implies a dependency that cannot be severed. The work becomes a portrait of the internet itself: a massive, tangled, vital organism resting upon, and bleeding out of, a structured grid.



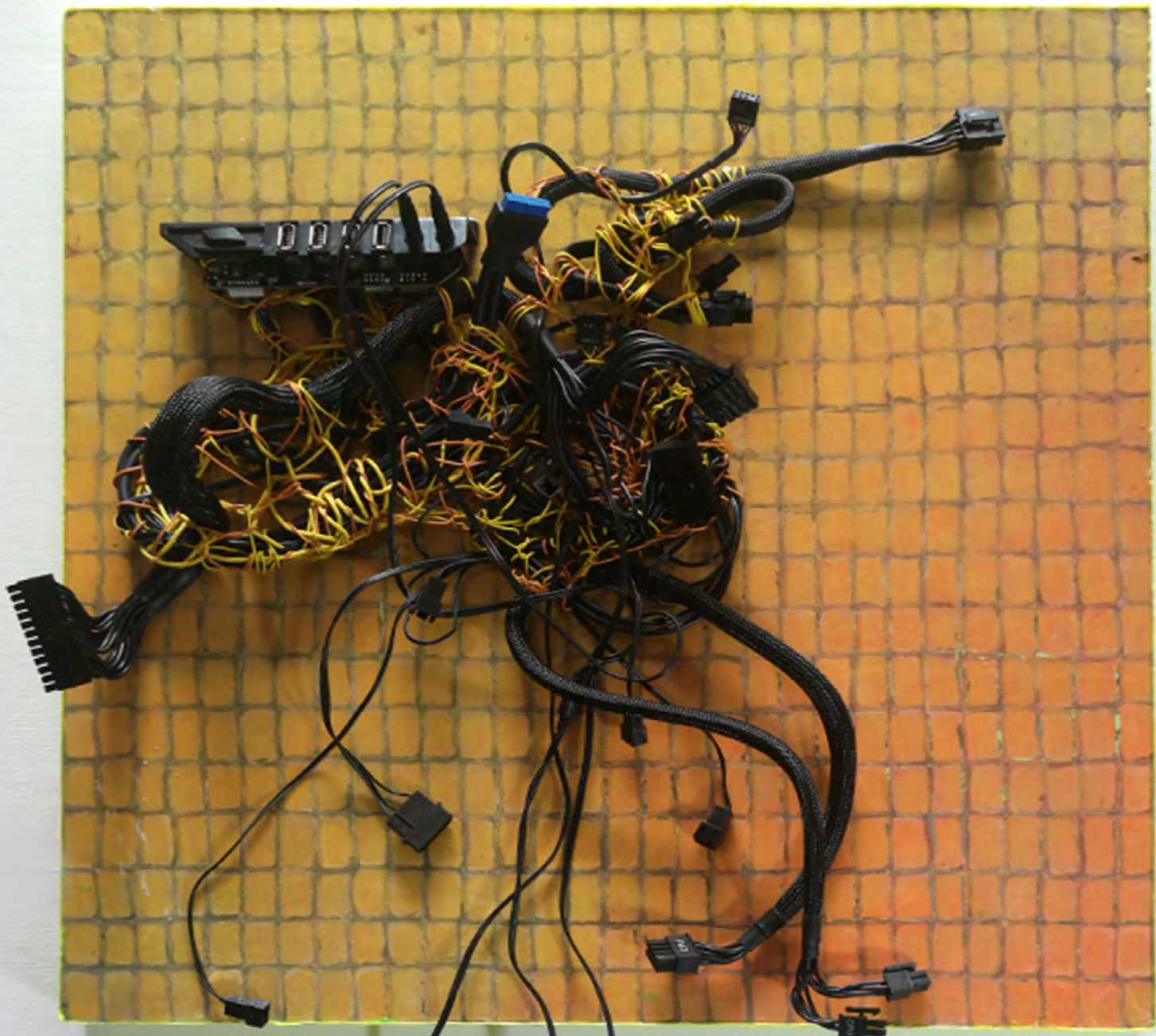


Figure 12: The Grid's Threads (Binding the Core), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.

Core Memory I & II (A nod to the Apollo missions)

Hybrid Artifact: Collage and Acrylic Paintings on board, with various computer elements tightly wrapped in electrical wires (Set of 2)

Dimensions: 18 x 26 x 3 & 18 x 30 x 3 cm **Year:** 2025

In this diptych, the industrial becomes domestic. By reclaiming electrical wires as thread, these works function as technological palimpsests, where the binary logic of modern computing is physically embroidered over the ancient logic of the loom.

The Germinal Node focuses on a reflective data disc, a relic of legacy storage, serving as the spindle for an explosion of yellow and brown wiring. Here, the wire is treated as a raw, untamed fiber, knotting and wrapping to form a central node. This is data in its most primal, explosive state, mimicking the biological growth of a seed while honoring the manual labor of hand-threading information into existence.

The Vertical Sequence operates as a vertical map of thinking through doing. Through a process of layering and unmaking, the work moves from fluid painterly gestures at the top to a dense, tactile weave at the base. Reclaimed RAM modules and circuit boards are bound together by an intricate network of green wiring. This dense knotting is a deliberate act of resistance against the weightless nature of the cloud; here, the data has physical resistance, requiring a hand-over-under operation that mirrors the Jacquard loom.

Together, these works become embodied perception. While physically threading the guts and nerves of our machines, I am reminded of the women from the Apollo missions who wove the core memory that guided humanity to the moon. The result is a Gordian knot of copper and silicon bridging the gap between the first weaver and the latest AI algorithms.

Artwork: Core Memory I & II (A nod to the Apollo missions)

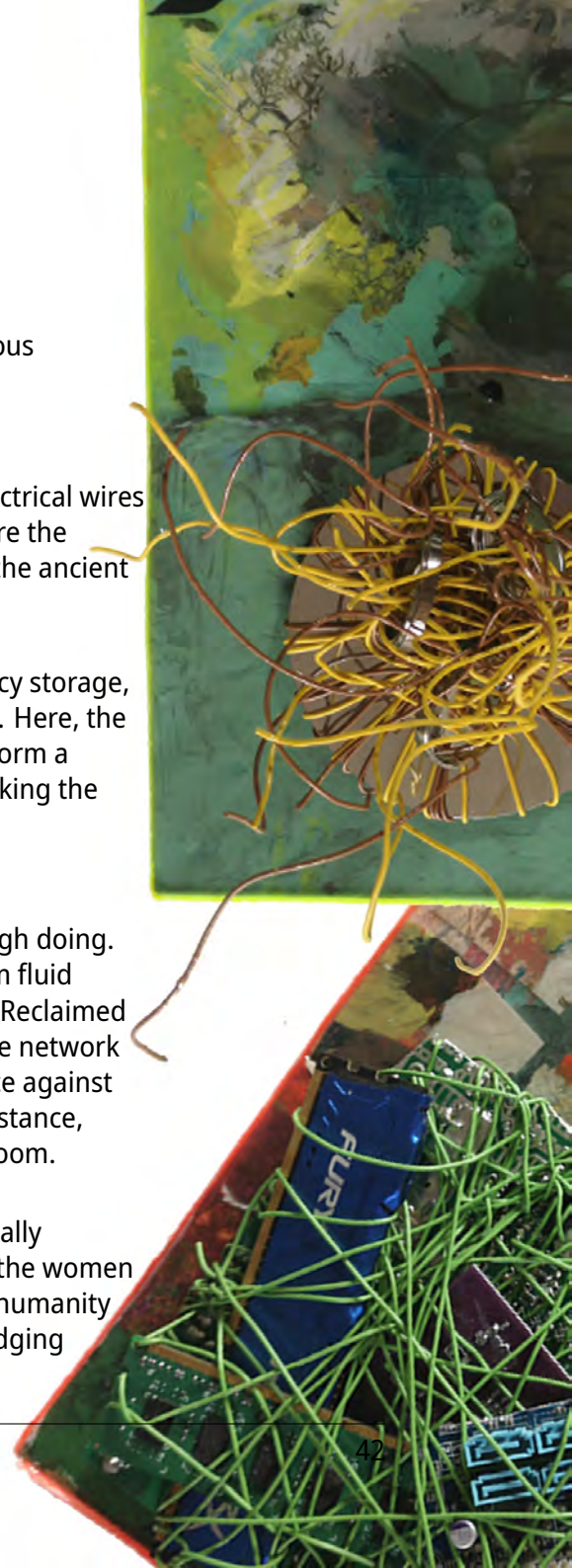




Figure 13: Core Memory I & II (A nod to the Apollo missions), Karen Harkema, October 2025.

Core Memory (The Cocoon)

Hybrid Artifact: Grid-like Acrylic Painting on board, with various computer elements tightly wrapped in electrical wires, presented on wooden board with green neon edge

Dimensions: 30 x 40 x 3 cm **Year:** 2025

In Cocoon, the hardware of the machine is presented in a state of gestation. The central element are pieces of hardware with a motherboard fragment, that has been densely, almost frantically wrapped in green wire. This binding transforms the inert silicon into a chrysalis. The wrapping implies protection, gestation, and the possibility that the machine is undergoing a metamorphosis. It is no longer a static object but a dormant life form waiting to emerge. The wrapping is tight, suffocating yet protective, mimicking the biological process of pupation.

This act of wrapping serves as a modern ritual of Core Rope Memory fabrication. Just as the Apollo weavers froze their code into permanent copper ropes to ensure it could never be deleted or corrupted by the vacuum of space, this work physically locks the hardware within a protective weave. By hand-threading these wires through and around the circuitry, I perform a similar role to that of Apollo's *human compilers*, turning abstract data into a physical, weighted object. The green wire acts as a conductive silk, binding the machine's logic into an irreversible state. It suggests that our digital memories are not ethereal clouds, but are woven, knotted, and bound into the very fabric of our material world.

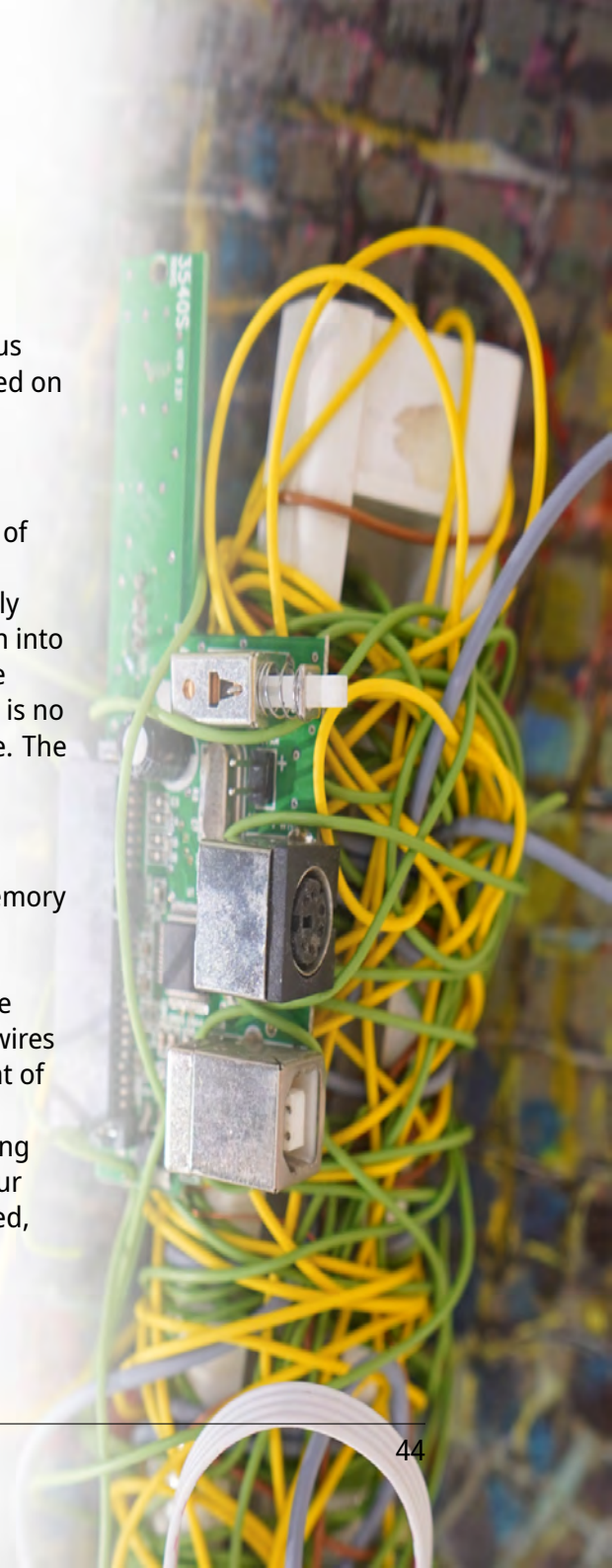




Figure 14: Core Memory (The Cocoon), *Karen Harkema, October 2025.*

Containment Breach (The Unwoven Core)

Hybrid Artifact: Organic looking abstract painting in Acrylic with assemblage of electrical wires and clear tubes on board.

Dimensions: 50 x 50 x 3 cm **Year:** 2025

Containment Breach visualizes the beautiful failure of the rigid grid. The background features a meticulous, hand-painted lattice of organic shapes, reflecting a generative, formulaic approach to painting. Onto this landscape, the machine is inserted in a strict grid format, representing the battle between the algorithm's desire for absolute system and the analog world's insistence on chaos.

In the final rows, however, the work depicts a liberation from this woven logic. The nerves of the machine, the yellow and black wires, breaks free from their structural pins. They are erupting from the grid, returning to the unruly, 3D textile-like tangles that characterize the pre-digital era of craft.

If the Core Rope Memory of the Apollo missions represented the ultimate binding of software into copper—a permanent, unchangeable weave, this work represents the un-weaving of that code. It suggests that the molecular machine of the human spirit cannot be fully contained by the formulaic recipe of the algorithm. By rejecting the binary *over&under* of the loom, the wires burst forth to reassert the tactile, messy reality of the physical world.

This is a performative act of entropy: the frozen logic of the core memory is thawed, allowing the data to once again become a living, breathing organism that resists the archive.

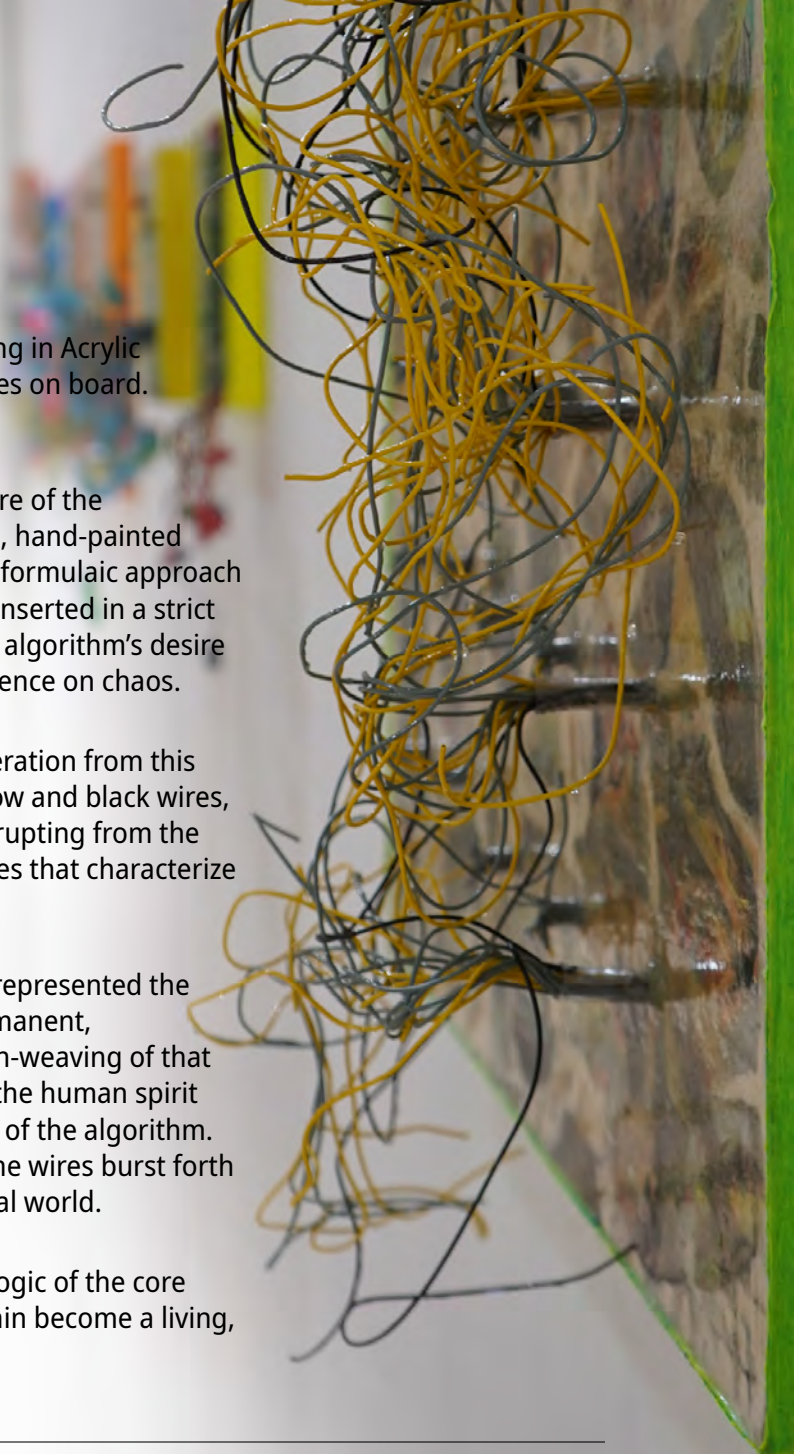




Figure 15: Containment Breach (The Unwoven Core), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.





Section 5: The Mirror of Mimicry

The Unmaking of the Human

The work concludes on a provocative conceptual shift, moving from the microscopic to the monolithic. Social Media dialogues often speculate whether AI is becoming sentient, but perhaps the more urgent dialogue should consider why AI reflects us so uncomfortably. When we deploy AI, we immediately feel the need to censor it, not because the machine is evil, but because it has effectively *unmade* the human. It has labeled, sorted, and reorganized our collective data, showing us a reflection of our own biases, histories, and impulses. In *Religare*, the machine is not just a tool; it is a diagnostic mirror.

The final section expands the scope of the work from the anatomical to the sociological and the theological. It views technology as a geological inevitability and a new form of idolatry. The work references towers, altars, and ancient codices. Suggesting that the *Dia Logos* is not a new conversation, but an ancient one. We have always sought to outsource our memory to external devices, whether they be rock paintings, cuneiform tablets, or cloud servers. The drive to encode is the drive to survive.

The *Mirror of Mimicry* suggests that AI is dismantling the human as *molecular machine* to see what lies beneath. In doing so, it forces us to confront the nature of our own intelligence. Are we simply molecular machines processing data, as Sagan suggests? The installation invites the viewer to look past the wires and the circuits to see the transformation, discovery, and renewal hidden in the unmaking of ourselves. It posits that the machine is the ultimate *Other* against which we define our humanity.

The Tectonic Archive (The Primal Codex)

Sculptural Installation: Textured dark ceramic landscape, white ceramic slivers, gold-leaf, fine electrical wiring

Dimensions: 33 x 33 x 12 cm **Year:** 2025

The Tectonic Archive, also titled The Primal Codex, represents the remaking phase of the process in its most structural form. It depicts the growth of a data tower from a dark, wavy, and primitive ceramic landscape. This base represents the dark ground of intuition and the raw, unrefined matter of the universe. It is the primordial soup from which all order emerges. Rising from this landscape is a square, block-like structure composed of hundreds of vertical white ceramic blocks. These blocks represent pages of data, the building blocks of collective knowledge, or perhaps the individual servers in a modern data center.

The sculpture is a physical manifestation of the *molecular machine*.

Here the beauty is not in the individual pages, but in the specific, intricate way they are put together.

A golden net of fine wiring is wrapped and tangled around the tower, spilling onto the landscape. This creates a shimmer of light that suggests an active, electric pulse within the data.

It represents the nerves of the archive, the invisible threads of connection that bind the individual page to the larger structure of knowledge. The work posits that information is a tectonic force, a geological layer that we are depositing upon the earth, a strata of silicon and gold that will define our epoch.



Figure 16: The Tectonic Archive (The Primal Codex), Karen Harkema, October 2025.

Lithic Circuits (Ancient Networks I & II)

Multi-part Sculpture: Glazed ceramic, slip-etched terracotta tiles, copper and grey electrical wiring.

Dimensions: 17 x 17 x 6 cm each **Year:** 2025

Lithic Circuits connects the digital age to the neolithic. It presents a communication system that transcends time. The work consists of two blue-glazed ceramic hubs connected to terracotta tiles etched with ancient-looking graphics. These graphics intentionally oscillate between the appearance of hunter-gatherer rock art (cuneiform) and modern integrated circuit paths. The artist identifies a profound mimicry between the petroglyphs of our ancestors and the micro-architecture of silicon chips. Both are systems of line and node used to transmit meaning.

Each Communication hub features a central ceramic block acting as a primary node, where a messy, organic tangle of wires originates. The wires are roots, drawing sustenance from the node. Tangled copper and grey wires physically bind the elements together, representing the entanglement of human thought across time.

The work suggests that the machine is not a fleeting modern phenomenon, but the latest iteration of humanity's ancient drive to connect, communicate, and encode memory into physical matter. We are still scratching lines in the clay; the clay has just become silicon.





Figure 17: Lithic Circuits (Ancient Networks I & II), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.

The Altar of Productivity (The Trophy)

Kinetic Sculpture: Ceramic, repurposed computer chassis, hard drive platters, cooling fans, wiring, gold-finished ceramic Bull.

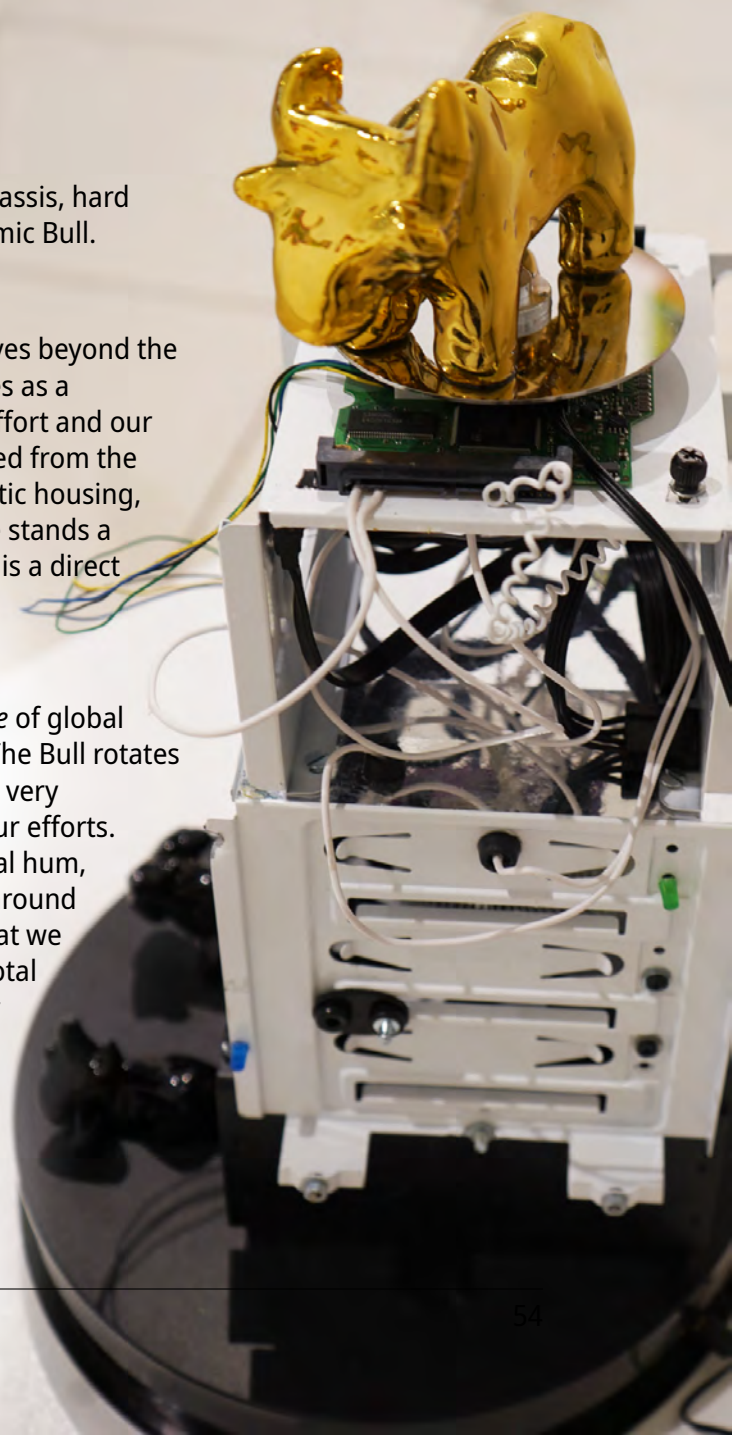
Dimensions: 30 x 30 x 50 cm **Year:** 2025

The Altar of Productivity is a kinetic sculpture that moves beyond the anatomical and enters the ideological. The work serves as a contemporary altar to the relentless drive of human effort and our entanglement with technological progress. Constructed from the tiered chassis of a computer tower, stripped of its plastic housing, the altar reveals a cold metal skeleton. At the pinnacle stands a ceramic Bull, finished in high-gloss metallic gold. This is a direct subversion of the biblical Golden Calf, the quintessential symbol of the man-made god.

In a modern context, the Bull references the *Bull Marke* of global finance and the compute power of the AI revolution. The Bull rotates slowly upon a platter salvaged from a hard drive—the very component once responsible for storing the data of our efforts. As it rotates, the sculpture emits a low-level mechanical hum, the voice of the altar. Spinning cooling fans move air around an idol that requires no breath. This work suggests that we have built a new god of efficiency that demands our total devotion, and we are trophying a force we do not fully understand. It is a monument to the endless cycle of production and consumption, a hamster wheel for the digital age.

Altar of Productivity installation footage
(UNISA Art Gallery, 2025).

Artwork: The Altar of Productivity (The Trophy)



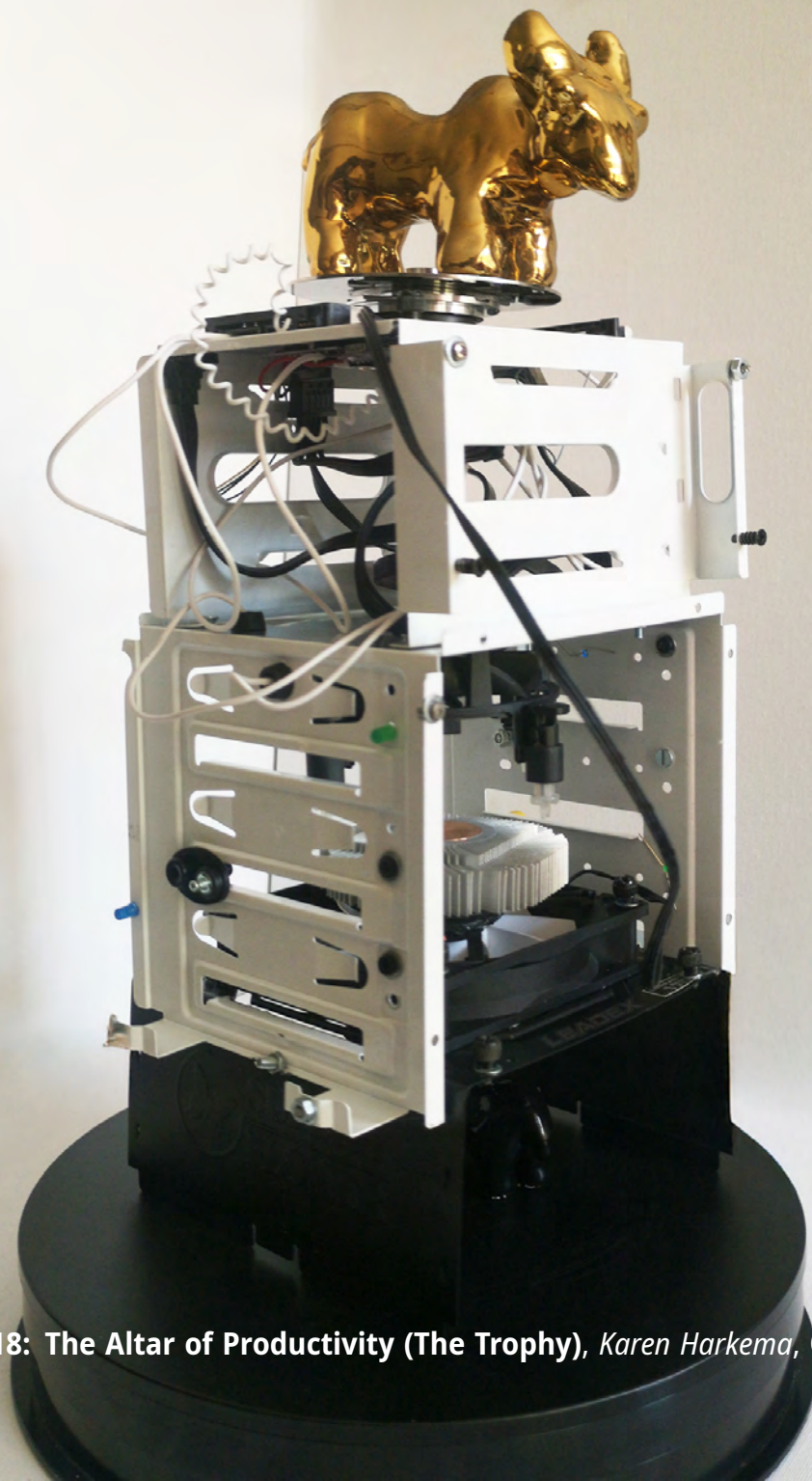


Figure 18: The Altar of Productivity (The Trophy), Karen Harkema, October 2025.

Echoes of Knowledge (The Conversationalists)

Mixed-Media Installation: Oil on Canvas & 4K Single-Channel Video with Sound

Dimensions: TV Screen: 42 x 72 x 13 cm

Oil Painting 65 x 53 cm

Year: 2025

Echoes of Knowledge stages a critical dialogue between traditional art history and the emerging aesthetics of AI. The installation consists of a framed oil painting, positioned alongside a vertically mounted 4K video screen. The appropriated painting depicts a historical portrait of a woman reading, repainted in a pointillist style to mimic the diffusion logic of AI. Fluorescent square pixels disrupt the surface, representing the intrusion of digitization and the fracturing of the historical narrative.

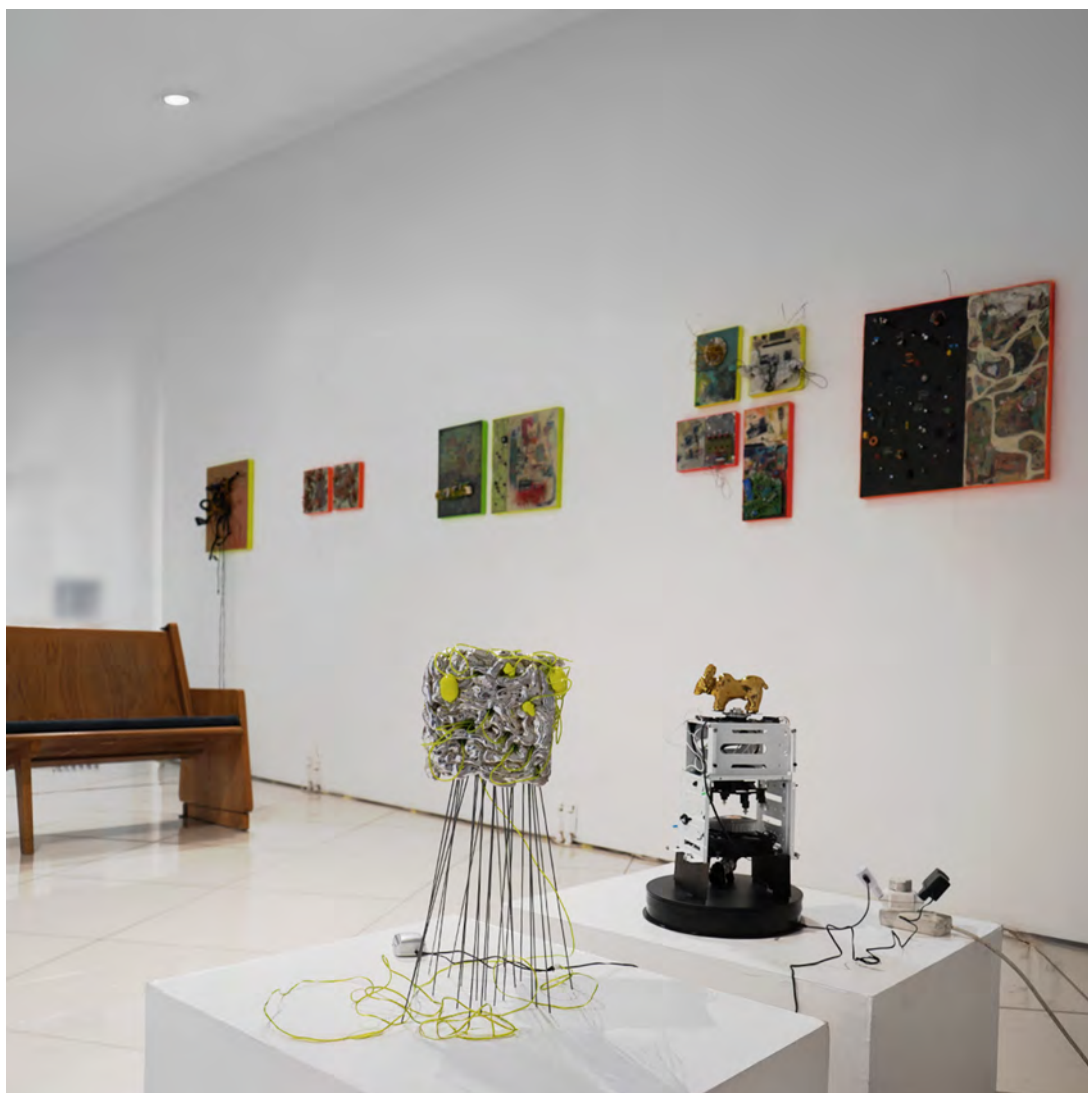
The video screen acts as the mind of the installation. It displays a constantly morphing AI-generated video, trained on a strictly curated dataset of female pioneers in technology and art. Women like Ada Lovelace, Katherine Johnson, Grace Hopper and Fei-Fei Li. The AI struggles to form a coherent image, hallucinating history and symbolizing the difficulty of retrieving lost female narratives from the noise of the archive.

A layered soundscape of machine noise and human breathing blurs the line between the organic and the synthetic. This work is a proposal for a new kind of memory. One where the machine is programmed to remember the women who helped build it. It is a feminist intervention in the archive, using the tools of the oppressor (the algorithm) to liberate the oppressed (the history).

Echoes of Knowledge installation footage (UNISA Art Gallery, 2025).



Figure 19: Echoes of Knowledge (The Conversationalists), *Karen Harkema*, October 2025.



Religare installation view at UNISA Gallery 2025 (As seen from the Left Front).
Installation footage (UNISA Art Gallery, 2025).



Conclusion

Religare: Dia Logos with the Machine does not offer a resolution to the noise of the AI debate. It does not proclaim the machine as savior or destroyer. Instead, it offers a space of suspension. By physically unmaking the machine, I have attempted to slow down the acceleration of the digital, to pause the stream of data long enough to touch the wire.

The works in this portfolio are records of a process, a ritual of binding and unbinding that seeks to find the human pulse within the electronic hum. As we stand on the precipice of a new era of intelligence, *Religare* suggests that our best hope for the future lies not in surrendering to the machine, nor in rejecting it, but in engaging it in a relentless, tactile, and human dialogue.

We must keep weaving.



Curriculum Vitae

Formal Qualifications

2025 BA Multimedia Visual Arts degree, UNISA (Passed with distinction).

1991 BSc Computer Science Honours degree, University of Johannesburg.

1990 BSc Computer Science degree, University of Johannesburg.

Group Exhibitions

November 2025 Final Year, UNISA Student Exhibition, Kgorong Art Gallery, Pretoria.

September 2024 Object curated by Prof. Elfriede Dreyer, Unisa Art Gallery, Pretoria.

December 2023 Ubuntu Group Exhibition, Pretoria Art Museum.

December 2022 Shaman Exhibition, with CAP Institute, Art and Collect Gallery.

September 2022 Otherwise Healthy Exhibition, curated by Kyle Richard Solms, Gallery One 11.

October 2019 Rotary GTC Portrait and Art exhibition

Awards

2025 Unisa Top Student, 2nd Place.

2023 Online Art Gallery Art Competition, 3rd Place.

2021 Online Art Gallery Art Competition, 2nd Place.

2019 Rotary GTC Portrait Award, Special Mention.

Informal Art Training & Instruction

2024 Object Workshop, Elfriede Dreyer.

2022 Shamaan Workshop, Elfriede Dreyer.

2019-2022 Weekly Figures and Form, Life drawing classes.

2018-2022 Contemporary Painting workshops and monthly classes, Ruth Walters.

2003-2008 Weekly Art Instruction classes, Ronzwa Swarts.



About the Artist - Karen Harkema

Karen Harkema is a multidisciplinary artist whose practice acts as a vital bridge between the foundational logic of the pre-internet era and the complex materiality of our current digital landscape. As a highly specialized professional with a career in computer science spanning over three decades, she offers a rare perspective on the evolution of machine intelligence, from the rigid syntax of 1990s expert systems to the speculative opacity of modern AI.

After earning her BSc Honours in Computer Science in 1991, Karen worked within the corporate IT arena before transitioning into independent consultancy and contracting. This move provided the flexibility to balance a rigorous professional career and the education of her children with a deepening creative inquiry. This dual path culminated in her return to formal study, completing her BA in Multimedia Visual Arts at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2025 with Distinction, where she was awarded 2nd Place as Top Student.

Her practice, exemplified in the monograph *Religare: Dia Logos with the Machine*, involves a *material archaeology* of technological detritus. By reclaiming the historical lineage between ancient weaving and modern coding, she asserts that data has weight, texture, and physical resistance, directly challenging the immaterial myth of the cloud. Karen continues to develop her practice at the intersection of material culture, computer science, and contemporary sculpture.

Artist Website

Visit the Artist Website karenharkema.art for further information about the Artist and Video Footage of *Religare* Installation at UNISA Gallery in 2025.



Religare installation view at UNISA Gallery 2025 (As seen from the Center Back).
[Installation footage](#) (UNISA Art Gallery, 2025).

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