

# Curating the Digital



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Dorothee Richter and Paul Stewart

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Sabine Himmelsbach, Philip Howe, Ruth Patir,  
Yuri Pattison, Manuel Roßner, Dorothee Richter,  
New Scenario, Joshua Simon, Paul Stewart

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Dorothee Richter

# Curating the Digital

## Curating and Art Practice: Contemporary Considerations on Automation, Place, and Digital Communication

### Dorothee Richter and Paul Stewart

This issue compiles a series of perspectives on art-making and curating that consider forms of production through contemporary digital networks as well as increased reliance on digital technologies. The issue was developed based on Paul Stewart's interest and research at the beginning. Dorothee Richter joined into the project at a later moment, introducing some additional aspects. It is clear that the overall topic is expanding in many directions; we therefore consider the issue as a much-needed start to discuss curating under digital conditions on our platform. Each interview, artwork, and article thinks through contemporary practices that rework or examine what the relationship of place, automation, labour, and archives have in relation to technological effects in production under neoliberalism. It is the amalgamation of more than a year's worth of reflection and collaboration. This includes four interviews focused on art practice and digital art-making and also how the digital is an asset in the making and production of art and society. We are excited to present and bring together the thoughts and words of such a variety of strong and needed voices that exist in the art, political, and academic worlds. The issue also seeks to consider media artworks that are process-oriented or immaterial (for example, only software), or networked systems and how they exist in gallery collecting processes and preserving of media art.

When we proposed this issue, it came out of a short (.pdf) publication, "Scene Afterform: Bona-fide Sites and the Meta Community :)" to coincide with a performance by Omsk Social Club. In that piece, we pulled together eleven small propositions for a digital future and ideas for how curating and artworks function in the wake of URL. The intervention by Omsk Social Club at Migros Museum fuer Gegenwartskunst, Zurich, was part of the series, "Speculative Curating", curated by Dorothee Richter.<sup>1</sup>

For Paul, as one of the editors, the issue made it possible to form questions around what is community in a digital narrative and what is the relationship between the digital and IRL (in real life): "I have reached a conclusion that the defining of categories of URL and IRL being separate is tokenistic and does not politically enable any progress. This conclusion is arrived at through interviews with Helen Hester and Amanda Beech, who have offered great insight into how digital is a material that is just as real and physical as the hardware that frames it. Taking this into account I will now go onto present the articles you will interact with on the following pages." Dorothee did focus more in the theoretical and historical perspective of curating the digital.

Sabine Himmelsbach, Director, House of Electronic Arts Basel (HeK), focuses on the specific challenges an institution has to deal with when curating and collecting media

art. This is done from the personal perspective of HeK, using examples of the institution's three main trajectories—presenting, mediating, and collecting digital art—and also addressing how public understanding can be developed within the social and political complexities of art and media technologies. This article provides an insight into how institutions can respond to changes in art forms and propose strategies for immersive learning programmes and how to treat the medium with respect.

There are four in-depth interviews that took place in Summer 2017 and have been part of an ongoing conversation as this editorial has come into being: the first of the four interviews, with Amanda Beech, seeks to reflect on how Beech creates work with digital and video forms as well as her considerations as a writer and thinker related to the role of automation and future trajectories for society through digital art practices. The interview verges on trying to understand the politics of the digital in art-making and activism as well as in curatorial or collecting practices. In the second conversation, Paul, KA Bird (an artist based in Middlesbrough, UK), and Helen Hester (Professor at University of West London) discuss the role of the manifesto in a digital form through the Xenofeminist manifesto. They go on to consider what role art institutions can play in questioning gender, automation, and ideas of community through developments in digital technologies and communication platforms. Following this interview, Philip Howe's interview with Yuri Pattison begins with reflecting on Howe's first IRL encounter with Yuri Pattison's work, namely, *RELIable COMmunications*. The interview seeks to understand Pattison's practices and how he interacts with the digital to build co-working and delocalised collaborations. The fourth interview is between Joshua Simon and Ruth Patir on the purpose and directions behind the exhibition *In the Liquid*, curated by Joshua for the Print Screen Festival in Bat Yam, a quarter of Tel Aviv. The project stretches the curatorial agency extremely far, insofar as the works shown are not artworks as such; these non-things are stretched along a circular rotunda of lightboxes, vitrines, and screens, suggesting a long-form sentence with no beginning or end, as described in the interview between Joshua and Ruth Patir: "The exhibition included, among other items, a 3D 'glow in the dark' printed gun, a bitcoin bank coin, a 1080i graphic card, a video of a 1984 Macintosh commercial, a book about the art of seduction, and hundreds of cans with Silicon Valley's super-food Soylent Green."

The two commissioned artworks for the issue are from Manuel Roßner (Float Gallery) and the collective known as New Scenario. Manuel Roßner has produced a slowly flowing liquid digital form. Presented through video (a link can be found in the issue) and in stills from the video in the issue, it demonstrates the flooding of digital data into a real-life space, creating architectural forms on existing forms. Roßner states: "My assumption is: physical space has a status quo because our bodies are part of this reality, but this is about to be disrupted by immersive experiences as well as artificial intelligence." And through the works on the following pages, you can see an algorithm discovering the borders of an invisible container, which actually is the space in the background on a smaller scale. New Scenario have produced four posters that seek to demonstrate tools, routes, and suggestions for making works or curating in web browsers and in real life or traditional gallery spaces. These posters/works consider the curators' influences on the setting, in which they choose a certain location, situation, or scenario for the (image) production or their influence on the stage design of the work. To round off the two artist commissions that are presented is visual essay of a three-person action poem performed by three computer-generated voices that looks to question routes of navigation or materials such as tarmacs or the fibre-optics that allow us to scan the web as spaces of divergence and utilities for alternate experiences.

For the short (.pdf) publication, Paul started his introduction with a fictional narrative. He asked the reader to think of the work being presented as the possibility of creating something with a fictitious nature. More precisely, a fictitious attempt to contextualise what might be a community in its separate nodes of a publication. He calls for the reader to do the same through this issue. Its ideas are legitimate, and the works need to be considered with serious reflection and contemplation, but what is important about this collection of texts is the exciting possibilities of generating strategies in curating in relation to the digital. It offers a toolbox of perspectives; for example, New Scenario's commissioned artworks are poster strategies for how to make and curate work online and in their working methodologies.

A historical perspective on curatorial and artistic work in relation to technological developments is provided by Dorothee, presenting an overview of the subject.

Inspired is our thinking also by Felix Stalder's highly recommended *The Digital Condition*. He outlines some relationships between navigating the web and curating, pointing out the possibilities and threat by the digital condition along the registers of referentiality, communality and algorithmicity.<sup>2</sup>

In the article "(NON-)THINGS, or Why Nostalgia for the Thing Is Always Reactionary," Dorothee Richter develops the idea that the longing for materiality could be recognised as a symptom of the digital age. She makes this argument via historical visual narratives and via theories on how images and exhibitions generate meaning.

The issue is concentrating on the digital in a moment when a pandemic is demonstrating that our ways of communicating will change drastically in the coming years.

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## Notes

**1** "Speculative Curating", a series of interventions in the collection of the Migros Museum with projects by artists Omsk Social Club Feat PUNK IS DADA, Christian Falsnaes, Donatella Bernardi, Johanna Bruckner curated by Dorothee Richter, Oct. 2016 – Jan 2017.

**2** Felix Stalder, *The Digital Condition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

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**Dorothee Richter** is Professor in Contemporary Curating at the University of Reading, UK, and head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, CAS/MAS Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland; She is director of the PhD in Practice in Curating Programme, a cooperation of the Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Reading. Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she was initiator of Curating Degree Zero Archive, Curator of Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, at which she curated different symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts and an archive on feminist practices, Materialien/Materials; recently she directed, together with Ronald Kolb, a film on Fluxus: *Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera*.

**Paul Stewart** is an artist and curator based in Gateshead, England. He is a lecturer and course leader BA Fine Art at MIMA School and Art and Design, Teesside University. Completed a PhD (2018) titled: *The Alternative Art School: Art, Hegemony and Critical Pedagogy*. MA in Art & Politics from Goldsmiths College (2012), BA in Fine Art at University of Lincoln (2011)t. He was the co-founder of the Middlesbrough Art Weekender, Bad Spirits, and the Alternative Art College. He has exhibited work and published around topics sitting at the intersection between art practice, the digital, politics, and critical pedagogy.



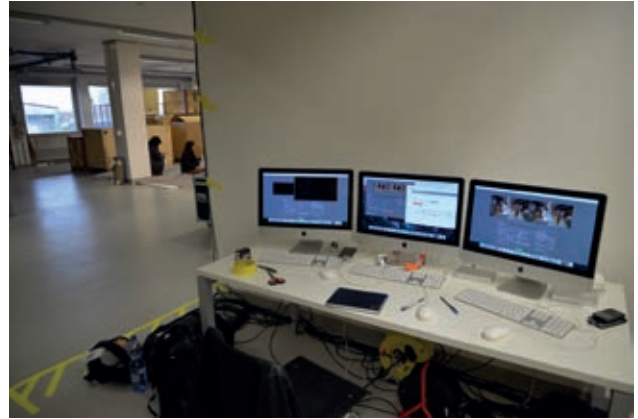
Performance: "Live Stream"  
with Omsk Social Club Feat PUNK IS DADA  
Sa Nov 19th, 10 am – 5 pm

*Speculative Curating* curated by Dorothee Richter  
*Speculative Curating* in cooperation with Migros Museum fuer Gegenwartskunst 20th Anniversary.  
Omsk Social Club Feat PUNK IS DADA held a performative intervention, connecting the exhibition space of the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst with the deposit of the collection. Omsk Social Club feat. PUNK IS DADA



"Live Stream"





"Live Stream"

# Curating the Digital A Historical Perspective

## Dorothee Richter

It is commonplace now that despite how incredibly young digital media in fact are, they have nevertheless upended all aspects of our daily life—all infrastructure, all ways of communication, all production processes. It is more than obvious that these profound changes and turmoil, with their material infrastructures, their image production, their ideological constructions, and their acceleration, have changed and influenced all ways of living, of being, and of being-with, from dating to voting to the exchange of goods and money. Literally everything is now influenced through the digital space, and what is more, processed through algorithms, which, of course, have racist, gender-specific, class-related, and national undercurrents. Just to cite one example: on dating platforms, people are suggested to each other based on a resemblance in income, “race”, and other issues, so these tools help to sustain classes, or even breeding specific classes, “races”, and so on. Here we are, still astonished, fighting for an awakening, as we try to grasp what all of this means, and we try to react, to comment, and to respond with our activist, artistic, and/or curatorial means.

When I started to write this text, I wanted to briefly present and discuss exhibitions that have dealt with digital media and therefore reflected and (re)presented outlooks on digital media and its connotation. These exhibitions function as nodes in the discourse on the digital and its contexts. During the writing process, I became more and more uneasy; did this kind of overview not claim to formulate an approved history of digital art? And did it not—and, of course, this did not come as a surprise—show a severely male-dominated area? In summarising the exhibitions and projects that one finds when researching digital art, one reproduces mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. I recognised during my research that feminist approaches to digital media in particular are more or less neglected in the official history of digital media, existing instead in twilight zones, which are much harder to (un)cover.

So, when I tell here the his-story of exhibition-making concerned with the digital, I want you, dear reader, be aware of the hidden parts—they are there, but partly not available. Especially if one concentrates on the nodes in the discourse, the big exhibitions. Please keep this in mind.

Nevertheless, I want to briefly present and discuss exhibitions (and some artistic projects) that have dealt with digital media and have therefore reflected and (re)presented outlooks on digital media and its connotation.<sup>1</sup> I have tried to weave more neglected positions into this mainstream narrative, to make you aware that there is more behind the official reading. I will briefly mention, as most literature does, that at the beginning of the 1950s, a group of scientists and engineers working for the US Navy during WWII on code-breaking, a division known as the Communications Supplementary Activity - Washington (CSAW), founded ERA, the so-called Engineering Research Associates, who developed numerical computers and memory systems.<sup>2</sup> (This might also explain the absence of women in the early stages.) Another boost for the development of digital systems was a meeting of IBM users, which developed into the still existing platform SHARE Inc., a volunteer-run user group for IBM mainframe computers that was founded in 1955 by Los Angeles-area users of the IBM 701 computers.<sup>3</sup>

The bullet points of a public appearance in the arts are named by Mark Tribe and Jana Reena, such as the Computer Music Performance at MoMA in 1954 by founders of the Computer Music Center at the Columbia University, ASCII American Standard Code for Information Interchange in 1963, and the influential publication by Marshall McLuhan: *Understanding Media*.<sup>4</sup>

Around these special, representational, and widely acknowledged events (which I will describe in the following pages), many more artists experimented with electronic media, especially at the intersection of visual arts and music. As Dieter Daniels has researched, artists in the context of the Dortmunder Music days in particular integrated TV and the manipulation of TV early on in their work; the “first” one (if we want to follow this art-historical convention) was, as presented by Dieter Daniels, Nam June Paik.<sup>5</sup> Daniels “curated” the scientific platform of the ZKM, Centre for Art and Media Karlsruhe, whose archived remnants you can find under [www.medienkunstnetz.de](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de). This resource has not been developed further, but it is still valuable.<sup>6</sup>

TV, as a mass medium that influences big crowds, became part of daily life in the US and in Europe in the ‘40s and ‘50s, respectively. Daniels pointed out under the subtitle, “A medium without art”: “Television is the most efficient reproduction and distribution medium in human history, but it can scarcely be said to have come up with anything in the last half century that could be called an art form unique to that medium. The high-low distinction never took hold here in the way that it did in film. There is no form of high television culture that could be seen as a lasting cultural asset to be preserved for future generations. The only exception is the music clip, which has emerged since the 1980s. Selected examples of this form have attracted accolades in the context of art and become part of museum collections.”<sup>7</sup>

As Daniels explains, in Europe and in the US, radio and television developed differently; in the US, the commercial stations funded by advertising held the field, but in Europe for a long time the state was in charge of the programming, implying lofty cultural aims as well as political influence. Political parties and groups were involved in the decision-making for the programming. “In the USA, the average family in the 1960s was already watching about five hours of television per day. There was also a choice of over ten channels according to region. They broadcast round the clock, increasingly in colour from 1957. Until 1963, viewers in Germany were offered only one black-and-white channel, in the evenings only. Even so, it can be assumed that from 1965, with currently ten million television sets and statistically 2.5 viewers each, ‘television is already reaching the whole German nation.’”<sup>8</sup> Early critics of TV as a mass medium and as cultural industry were, of course, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, after having emigrated to the US and then returning to Germany as faculty members of the so-called Frankfurter School. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, cultural industry (or mass culture) creates a situation when culture becomes a commodity for the masses. The recipients degenerate into passive consumers, and the ideology conveyed by cultural presentations supports existing relations of domination. Cultural-industrial products support existing gender relations, racist discrimination, class divisions, and nationalist ideas. In late capitalism, one would have to add neoliberal working conditions, which are made palatable to us through cultural industry.<sup>9</sup> Cultural industry has to be separated from critical cultural production, which might show/transfer truth; this truth would always embody an awareness of the conditions of production.

Today, one can read that Marshall McLuhan had already foreseen major changes with his dictum “The medium is the message”; one can only shudder when the introduction of the book reads: “*Understanding Media* was written twenty years before the PC revolution and thirty years before the rise of the Internet. Yet McLuhan’s insights into our engagement with a variety of media led to a complete rethinking of our entire

society. He believed that the message of electronic media foretold the end of humanity as it was known.”<sup>10</sup> But one is also reminded on the forceful answer by Paul Beynon-Davies, “Communication: The medium is not the message,”<sup>11</sup> or the article by Daniel Pinheiro, “The medium is NOT the message!” which actually accompanied an exhibition in Portugal in 2017.<sup>12</sup>

One could argue that digital media can be used for war and for medical purposes alike, or for showing something as truthful as possible or as misleading information to influence political decisions; therefore, it is on the one hand clear that the medium and the message are definitely not the same, and that the content, of course, matters enormously. McLuhan also did understand the media in a very broad sense, but nevertheless his dictum has a rather interesting side to it. When McLuhan tried to demonstrate that media affects society in an extreme way, he pointed to the light bulb as an example. A light bulb does not have content in the way that a newspaper has articles or a television has programs, yet it is a medium that has a social effect; that is, a light bulb enables people to create spaces during night time that would otherwise be hidden in darkness, or to work at times when this was before impossible. He describes the light bulb as a medium without any content. As a conclusion, he states that “A light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence.”<sup>13</sup> In my perspective, media changes the material base of a society (one can work and produce day and night, for example), but it does not say anything about in what way “race”, class, and gender are repositioned by this change.

Today, about 51% of the world’s population uses the Internet; in Germany, about 88%; in Spain, about 82%; in Switzerland, about 87%; the highest percentage is in Iceland, 100%; and, of course, countries where people fight for their basic needs have the lowest percentage, like, for example, Eritrea at 1,1%, or Burundi at 1,5%.<sup>14</sup> Even so, the access to digital media through cell phones has increased enormously, especially in the countries in which only few households have access to WLAN.

Bernard Stiegler proclaims that digital media has caused a global hallucination. What has been proven essential is Bernard Stiegler’s argument that the influence of our constant connectedness with digital devices and digital spaces has profoundly changed the formation of our subjectivity and communities, and that in 2020, when this article was written, it is obvious that the bourgeois subject with a central perspective and with the concept of autonomy as its foundation is not applicable on a one-to-one basis today.<sup>15</sup>

To repeat McLuhan’s vision: “The tendency of electric media is to create a kind of organic interdependence among all the institutions of society, emphasizing de Chardin’s view that the discovery of electromagnetism is to be regarded as ‘a prodigious biological event.’”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it has a biological dimension in the way the production of everyday life and the production of subjectivity has changed.

New experiments with all sorts of media came up in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, if one thinks about the early experiments around the John Cage classes. One such happening took place at Gallery Parnass, in which Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman showed their experiments with electronic devices and a cello. As you clearly see, here they questioned notions of sexuality, high and low culture, sound, etc.<sup>17</sup> They worked together for some years, but as it happens, the more well-known partner of the duo became Nam June Paik. Charlotte Moorman was later even arrested in New York on charges of pornography for her performances.<sup>18</sup> The introduction of the first portable, easy-to-use camera was used by Nam June Paik in 1967. As it is said, Paik used it during the visit of the Pope, but, of course, not to film the Pope but to film scenes from everyday life happening in the meantime on the streets of NY. (The film as such is lost.)

Part of this big group of experimental artists was also Carolee Schneemann. This picture shows shots from her film *Fuses* from 1965. *Fuses* is a self-shot silent film of collaged and painted sequences of lovemaking between Schneemann and her then partner, composer James Tenney, observed by the cat, Kitch. Like so many female artists of her time, she used new technologies to question the relationship between private space and public space, thereby criticising gender relations and normative behaviour. Even if the big events got more attention, the film and then video provided also a new playground (and battleground for that matter) for testing roles and patterns.

- 1965 Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, *24 Stunden Happening*, 1965
- 1965 Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*
- 1966 E.A.T. Experiments in Art and Technology
- 1967 First transportable video camera by Sony, PortaPak
- 1968 *Cybernetic Serendipity* ICA London
- 1970 *Software* at Jewish Museum NY
- 1971 Floppy disk by IBM
- 1972 Atari video game company

One of the major shows about electronic and digital devices and performances was conceived in 1966, initiated by Robert Rauschenberg and Billy Klüver, and it was held at the 69th Regiment Armory: “9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering”.

The participants consisted of ten artists and some thirty engineers to create a blend of avant-garde theatre, dance, and new technologies. “9 Evenings” was the first large-scale collaboration between artists and engineers and scientists. The two groups worked together for ten months to develop technical equipment and systems that were used as an integral part of the artists’ performances.

And *medienkunstnetz* describes the events as follows: “The main technical element of the performances was the electronic modulation system TEEM, composed of portable, electronic units which functioned without cables by remote control. Cage used this system to activate and deactivate loud speakers that consistently reacted to movement by way of photo-cells. For not always being technically and artistically successful, these performances exhausted for the first time the full range of the live-aspect of electronics, taking advantage of its artistic potential in all of its diversity. Seen in that light, the ‘9 Evenings’ rank among the milestones of media art, even though today only a few filmed documents bear witness to the event.”

Medienkunstnetz mentions the following artists: John Cage, Lucinda Childs, Öyvind Fahlström, Alex Hay, Deborah Hay, Steve Paxton, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, and Robert Whitman.<sup>19</sup>

Wikipedia also mentions Merce Cunningham. And with further readings of descriptions and reports, one stumbles above other names. Notable engineers involved include: Bela Julesz, Billy Klüver, Max Mathews, John Pierce, Manfred Schroeder, and Fred Waldhauer.<sup>20</sup>

Closed-circuit television and television projection were used, a fiber-optic camera picked up objects in a performer’s pocket; an infrared television camera captured action in total darkness; a Doppler sonar device translated movement into sound; and portable wireless transmitters and amplifiers transmitted speech and body sounds to Armory loudspeakers. It is said that the art community in New York became involved in helping with “9 Evenings”, as fellow artists, dancers, musicians, and performers volunteered their time for setting up and troubleshooting, and then appeared in the performances. A high-powered, but slightly distorted publicity campaign resulted in more than 1,500 people each night attending the performances, many of them

astonished by the avant-garde performances they saw. It is clear that this event also demonstrated a great enthusiastic reaction to all possibilities of digital media. The underlying creativity concept combines a strong belief in technology with geniality. The figure of the male white artist is enhanced with that of the almost all-powerful engineer. The visitors were involved because they were moving in the middle of the action, the framing of a traditional exhibition with immobilized objects and controlled visitor-subjects was surpassed by this project, one could argue. This exhibition tried to reflect the major changes in society that started at that time, in the '70s, and involved all parts of daily life and all forms of culture. As Felix Stalder has put it: "It is more than half a century since Marshall McLuhan announced the end of the Modern era, a cultural epoch that he called the Gutenberg Galaxy in honor of the print medium by which it was so influenced. What was once just an abstract speculation of media theory, however, now describes the concrete reality of our everyday life. What's more, we have moved well past McLuhan's diagnosis: the erosion of old cultural forms, institutions, and certainties is not something we affirm but new ones have already formed whose contours are easy to identify not only in niche sectors but in the mainstream. [...] This enormous proliferation of cultural possibilities is an expression of what I will refer to below as the digital condition."<sup>21</sup> In this sense, the exhibitions and projects represent a rupture in the understanding of the human as the body in the hegemonic space of art as a part of an electronic environment, an involuntary participant, and the digital space could be seen as something interacting with the human body, where it became difficult to decide what became the cause and what the effect.



Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman, *24 Stunden Happening*, 1965



Carolee Schneemann, *Fuses*, 1965



Robert Whitman, *Two Holes of Water*, 1966 | Photography Robert Whitman, at "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering"

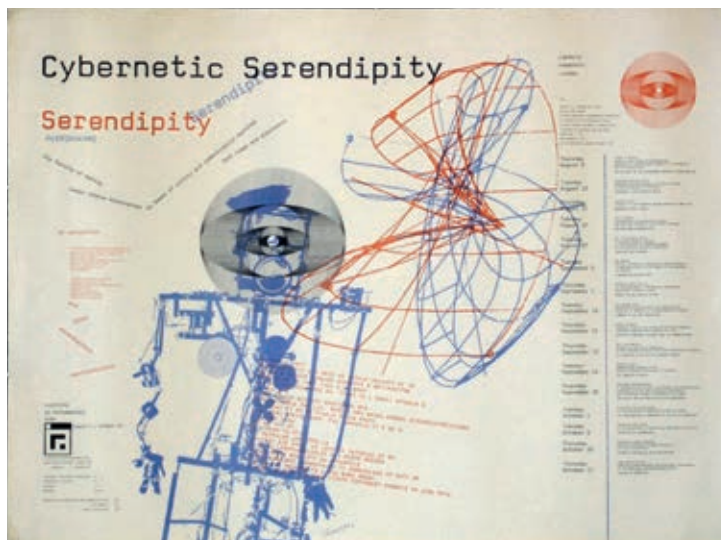
The next appearance of E.A.T. – Experiments in Art and Technology (Billy Klüver and Robert Rauschenberg), launched after having collaborated on many previous projects, was a major exhibition in a museum: the 1968 *Some More Beginnings* at the Brooklyn Museum presented a large number of innovative technical, electronic, and other media projects, but looked quite tame in the photos, with wooden floors and white walls. The ferocity and unfamiliarity of an old army hall was tamed by using the framework of bourgeois museum.

In 1968, *Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA London was curated by Jasia Reichardt<sup>22</sup>, and I quote here from the press release: "Cybernetics—derives from the Greek 'kybernetes' meaning 'steersman'; our word 'governor' comes from the Latin version of the same word. [...]"

A cybernetic device responds to stimulus from outside and in turn affects external environment, like a thermostat which responds to the coldness of a room by switching on the heating and thereby altering the temperature. This process is called

feedback. Exhibits in the show are either produced with a cybernetic device (computer) or are cybernetic devices in themselves. They react to something in the environment, either human or machine, and in response produce either sound, light or movement.”

There is still a website where you can see some of the works, and unlike the presentation in the short films on the net, where you get the feeling of playfulness and being immersed, the images of the exhibition present a surprisingly conventional exhibition design. This gesture of nobilitation started a new phase in the exhibition history of new media, as it clearly tried to reconcile the displays that were used in modernity with the somehow strange and dangerous immersive moment of the new formats provided by new media. When a new genre or medium is introduced into the canon, it is a customary gesture to present the new medium in the same manner high art was presented before to claim it as high art as well. The list of artists is exclusively male (as far as I see), and again, the short announcement of the curator is rather enthusiastic about this new world of technology. The ideological narrative equates enthusiastically human entities with machines. The problem with this kind of narrative is that it blurs where the possibility to act is located. The exhibition design that positions items in the same way as paintings usually are transmits the pretension of increasing the value and status of new media art and therefore the digital sphere.

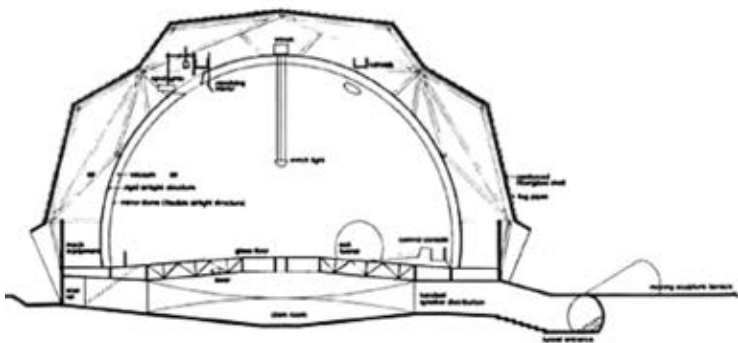


*Cybernetic Serendipity* at the ICA London, 1968



From the '70s onwards, one could exemplarily understand that the critical usage of digital media was happening not at representational exhibitions and projects, but in content-driven circles. *Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s* is a film essay by Laura Cottingham that is based on material found in feminist archives and shows how much the feminist movement was invested in video for recording and re-viewing as a tool of consciousness-raising practices and of subverting and re-formulating behaviour patterns. These films circulated in women's groups with decidedly feminist agendas, and since some artists were acknowledged in the official art world, Cottingham shows that the experimental formats and critical content were based on shared, multi-authored experimental feminist meetings. In Cottingham's own words:

The participants in the Feminist Art Movement arrived from different artistic and educational backgrounds. Some wanted to transform traditional European-derivative media, such as painting and sculpture, with feminist awareness; others, most notably the African American artists, sought to introduce non-European aesthetics and values into the American visual vocabulary. Still others eschewed object-making altogether in favor of performative strategies, championed video as the new frontier of artistic democracy, called for an elimination of the division between craft and fine art, united the aims of artistic freedom with those of political activism, or set forth an aesthetics based in an understanding of introducing female experience and female-coded labor, the female body, women's history, and individual autobiography as the foundations for a feminist art. Although the parameters of the Feminist Art Movement can be charted according to specific historical determinants such as exhibitions, meetings, individual productions, letters, publications and other documents, the Movement was first and foremost far from a unified front. The disagreements between its participants—some of which are overtly presented in *Not For Sale*, while others must be inferred by the viewer—are as crucial to its definition as the consensus that inspired and sustained it across ideological ruptures, personal frustrations, and a general lack of access to significant economic or institutional resources. Participants in the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s were motivated to transform the underlying tenants of fine art—including the production, critical evaluation, exhibition, distribution, and historical maintenance of art—beyond terms dictated by sexism. The challenge they offered has yet to be met.<sup>23</sup>



E.A.T., *Pepsi Pavillion*, Expo Osaka, 1970





*Pepsi Pavilion* by E.A.T. at Expo Osaka, 1970

On the side of mass-oriented media events, the pavilion at the Expo in Osaka was another attention-drawing activity by E.A.T. in 1970. As Randall Packer enthusiastically describes: “The ‘Pepsi Pavilion’ was first an experiment in collaboration and interaction between the artists and the engineers, exploring systems of feedback between aesthetic and technical choices, and the humanization of technological systems.” The Pavilion’s interior dome—immersing viewers in three-dimensional real images generated by mirror reflections, as well as spatialized electronic music—invited the spectator to individually and collectively participate in the experience rather than view the work as a fixed narrative of pre-programmed events: “The Pavilion gave visitors the liberty of shaping their own reality from the materials, processes, and structures set in motion by its creators.”<sup>24</sup>

Subjects are immersed in an environment, losing clear distinctions of space, sound, and time. The effect is a hallucinatory moment. The gaze regime changes here obviously from the central perspective to a hallucinatory scopic regime.<sup>25</sup> The subject is displaced from the position of the controlling overview and is now caught in confusing images and sounds. One can see it as a melancholy anticipation that this immersion was taking place under the auspices of a large-scale gigantic advertisement. “The spherical mirror in the Pepsi Pavilion, showing the real image of the floor and the visitors hanging upside down in space over their heads. This optical effect resembles that of a hologram. Because of the size of the mirror, a spectator looking at the real image of a person could walk around that image and see it from all sides. The effect was spectacular.”<sup>26</sup>

- 1970s Feminist movements in the US experimented with video
- 1974 Nam June Paik coins the notion “Information Superhighway”
- 1977 Apple II and Tandy TRS 80
- 1979 First Ars Electronic in Linz, Austria
- 1981 MS-DOS
- 1983 MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) presented at fair for North American Music Manufacturers
- 1984 The notion of “Cyberspace” was coined in a novel by William Gibson
- 1985 “A Cyborg Manifesto” by Donna Haraway

In 1974, Nam June Paik coined the notion of “Information Superhighway”. As technology rapidly moved towards personal computers, the desire to name these new phenomena grew. One can imagine the speed at which the technical side developed when one sees the old machinery at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View in Silicon Valley.

In 1979, the first Ars Electronica was held in Linz. This festival went far beyond mere representation; aesthetic and social aspects of the new technology were discussed in workshops and talks. Digital space specialists, artists, curators, and scientists took advantage of this exchange platform, which remains an important venue for the gathering to this day with 100,000 festival visitors. As you see in this amusing image, it hosts also an extensive archive of talks and workshops.<sup>27</sup> So, the festival seemed to be the more appropriate format for the new technology.

And while techniques of electronic music and synthesizers (as they were then called) were developed and changed the music business profoundly in the long run, the brave new world was reflected in literature as well. William Gibson invented the notions of *Cyberspace*, *Matrix*, *Cyberpunk*, and the *World Wide Web*, and he also uncannily anticipated a dark, rather brutal future of the USA, held together by corporate conglomerates, oligarchs, the military, the drug trade, and computer games.<sup>28</sup>

Donna Haraway emphasised more positive aspects of digital and electronic devices when she published “A Cyborg Manifesto” in 1985. In her writing, the concept of the cyborg is a rejection of rigid boundaries, notably those separating of “human” from “animal” and “human” from “machine”. She writes as follows: “The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family, this time without the oedipal project. The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.”<sup>29</sup> The Manifesto opened new ways to criticise and rethink traditional notions of gender, and rejected any form of fixed identity, or binary constellation; it proposed instead coalition through affinity. Haraway uses the metaphor of a cyborg to urge feminists to move beyond the limitations of gender, and politics; the “Manifesto” is considered an extremely important contribution to the discussion of feminist posthumanist theory.<sup>30</sup> These movements spread and grew in quasi-underground circles, coming to the surface in publications, existing in email lists, series of semi-public meetings, and discussion groups.

In 1985, Jean-François Lyotard curated, with Thierry Chaput, the exhibition *Les Immatériaux* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris. He worked with a medium that was basically unknown to him, but he used this strangeness to question philosophy as an activity at the same time. “Can we philosophize in the direction of the general public without betraying thought? And try to reach this public knowing they are not philosophers, but supposing that they are sensitive to the same questions that philosophers are also attempting to formulate.”<sup>31</sup>

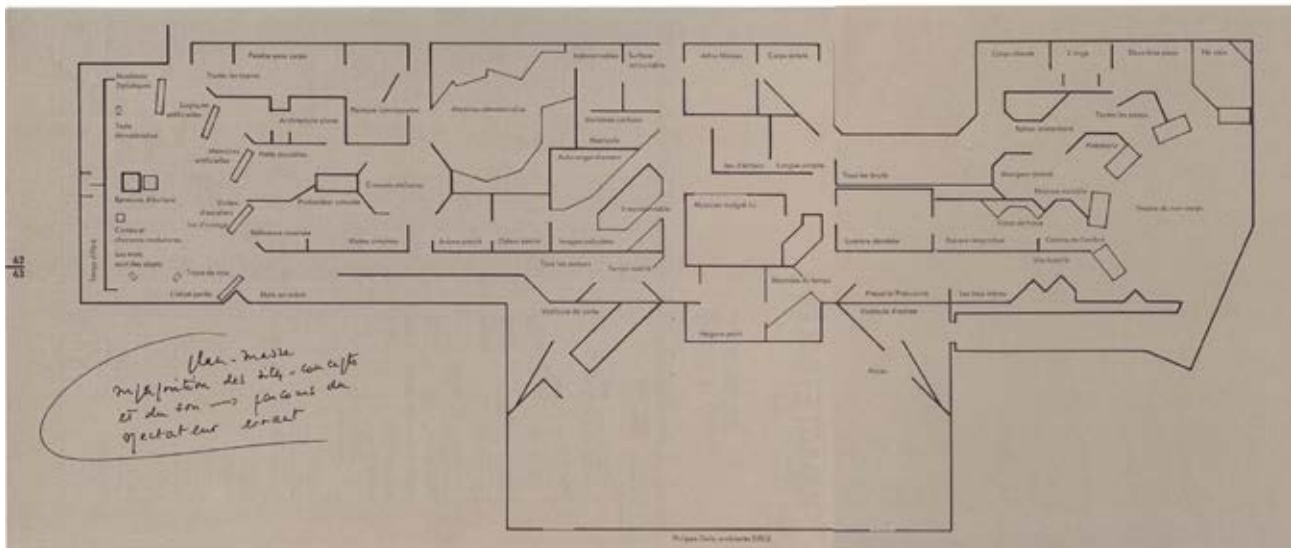
The idea for the exhibition design was that the exhibition in its display should resemble philosophy as a complex way of thinking. In the following, I refer to Antonia Wunderlich’s publication: “Der Philosoph als Kurator” (The Philosopher as Curator).

Wunderlich describes *Les Immatériaux* as a major event in French cultural life: it occupied the entire fifth floor of the museum (3,000 square metres), took two years to plan, and was the most expensive exhibition staged by the Pompidou up until that time. Visitors to the galleries were required to wear headphones that picked up different radio frequencies as they navigated a labyrinthine maze of grey metal mesh screens, such that each visual display was paired with an audio text, from Antonin Artaud and Frank Kafka to Paul Virilio, advertising jingles, and noise. Following her intensive research, the space was loosely divided into five possible paths or zones (subdivided into no less than sixty-one sites). Concluding from the complex floor plan, visitors could not possibly get an overview, they had to find their way through a labyrinth with dead ends and variations.

A total of 61 stations were structured by 30 infrared transmission zones for a head-phone program and five paths running through the entire space, so that the entire exhibition consisted of several interwoven semantic bundles. Those who allowed themselves to be discouraged by this complexity—and this indeed happened to many visitors, as the entries in the guest book and a large number of critical reviews show—left the Centre Pompidou disappointed or annoyed. In Wunderlich's understanding, it was precisely the immense physical, sensual, and intellectual challenge that lay in this complexity that was a central moment in Lyotard's conception. By means of a kind of constructive overload, he wanted to convey to the visitors an impression of their near future in a digitalized, de- and immaterialized world. As Wunderlich surmises, *Les Immatériaux* was intended to make it perceptible that everyday life would change radically and showed this in such disparate themes as nutrition and aromas, fashion and gender, architecture and photography, or the stock market and the automobile industry. From our contemporary point of view, this proved to be true; all spheres of life have been profoundly affected and changed in the meantime. Felix Stalder has pointed out three major trajectories in this cultural and societal change: referentiality, communality, and algorithmicity.<sup>32</sup> We will come back to this later.



*Les Immatériaux*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985



*Les Immatériaux*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985

Lyotard diagnosed this experience in an album that functioned as one of the three parts of the catalogue as a model for the future: “The visitor strolls around in a rhizome in which no thread of knowledge appears, but generalized interactions, deposition processes in which man is nothing more than an interface knot.”<sup>33</sup>

In this new model, the basic idea is therefore that philosophy should be taken into consideration, as important paradigms of modernity have to be given up, for example, the sovereign subject as author. One could connect this concept with the referentiality that is discussed by Stalder. One of the profound changes through digital media is referentiality, everything turns into something one could quote, the difference between the original has vanished. Consequently, Lyotard developed together with the exhibition architect media clusters in space with as much complexity as possible, created through the multitude of images and viewpoints and the semi-transparent division of spaces. Important for the exhibition design was the idea of a semantic openness.<sup>34</sup>

Andrea Wunderlich comes to the conclusion that in *Les Immatériaux*, Lyotard overlooked an important aspect of this mastery didactic: dialogue. For only the dialogue enables the master to adapt to the pupil as well as the pupil, to reassure himself and to protect himself from a complexity that oppresses him. By confronting the visitors of *Les Immatériaux* with the greatest possible complexity, Lyotard denied them the medial form of conversation, and through the headphones even made conversations between themselves impossible. In this way, she argues, *Les Immatériaux* became rather hermetic. Another reading of the setting and display would be that, in fact, Lyotard, with this authoritarian gesture, showed the effect of the Internet, a device that ties you in an affective entanglement but in the same time condemns its subject to a specific form of isolation.

Not directly connected to digital media, but as a theoretical exploration that is based indirectly in the possibility the net provides, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990. Like other feminists, such as Sigrid Schade and Silke Wenk, she discussed gender through a Lacanian perspective. In this view, gender is something that is implemented in the construction of subjectivity via language (the semiotic register). The development of the subjectivity is moreover founded in an imaginary wholeness, in the mirror stage. Especially gender is reaffirmed through a constant re-performance. This theoretical understanding also opened up a counterhegemonic re-reading and re-performing of gender. The now thinkable possibility to change binary gender codes, to invent or rediscover gender in multiplied digital versions of the self and new possibilities through medicine allowed that major change.

- 1990 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*
- 1991 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*
- 1991 Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology*
- 1991 VNS Matrix, *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century = the clitoris is the direct line to the matrix*
- 1994 Old Boys Network



*Hybrid WorkSpace at documenta X, 1997*



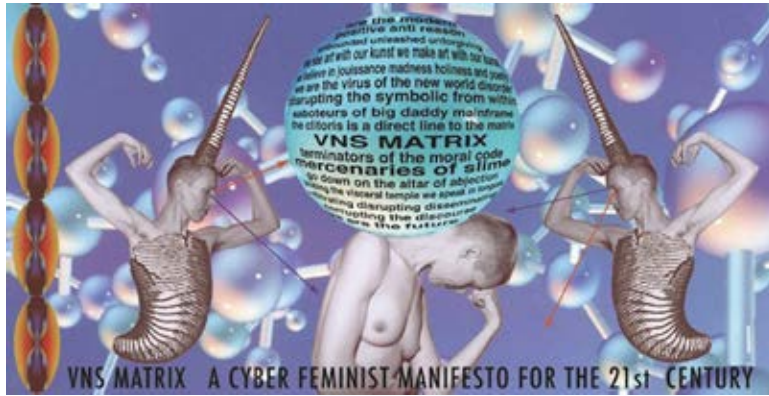
As has often been noted that *documenta X*, curated by Catherine David, represented on many levels a breach with the past, which I would like to characterise briefly, while the different levels deserve a lengthier and more detailed comparative analysis.<sup>35</sup> The changed interpretation of what is to be understood by contemporary art was noticeable at the very entrance to the documenta-Halle. Peter Friedl set his stamp on this documenta, declaring the hall, in neon letters, to be a CINEMA. This in itself indicates that the status of the “exhibition” had become uncertain, as had the status of the visitors as subjects.

On the level of the display, the emphasis was no longer entirely on individual pictorial works: instead, the visitor was enveloped in whole “environments”. So, the status of the work was no longer that of a classic, autonomous work of art: it might, for example, be a landscape created out of photo wallpaper, with the appearance of having been digitally produced, by Peter Kogler. This, too, situates the visitors: it appeals to them as subjects operating in the digital age, being in matrix, so to speak.

In the central area of the documenta-Halle, the curator dispensed with works of art altogether and set up a bookshop designed by Vito Acconci and a discussion area designed by Franz West. By doing this, she positioned art as part of a social and political discourse that included cultural and art studies. Overall, this pointedly demonstrated the nature of contemporary art as a complex discourse made up of a variety of subject matters, concepts, commentaries, and political contexts.

It is notable that Catherine David appointed Simon Lamunière as curator of the website and facilitated the creation of a *Hybrid WorkSpace*. The *Hybrid WorkSpace* was above all a largely uncontrolled space, which is hard to imagine when you think of previous and subsequent battles over access to the documenta exhibition space.<sup>36</sup> The *Hybrid WorkSpace* was initiated by Catherine David, Klaus Biesenbach, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Nancy Spector, but organised and curated in a way by an entire group: Eike Becker, Geert Lovink/Pit Schultz, Micz Flor, Thorsten Schilling, Heike Foell, Thomax Kaulmann, Moniteurs; the group was given the use of a five-room apartment where they could invite guests, plus a permanent space at documenta, with the possibility to make radio broadcasts, communicate with the outside world, and establish contacts with web initiatives and make them accessible.

It was “the summer of content”, as one of the organisers mentioned in an interview. The furniture was moveable, and workshops and discussions happened, and visitors could encounter the materiality of the digital works. This marks the moment when the digital condition became an ongoing topic in contemporary exhibitions, and the networks, mailing lists, and other formations became visible for one moment in a representational context. In 1991, the Australian group VNS Matrix (VNS Matrix (Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini, and Virginia Barratt) formu-



VNS Matrix, *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, 1991

lated a provocative manifesto: “The clitoris is the direct line to the matrix”, and in Europe, Old Boys Network, a group of feminist cultural producers, organised the first of a ‘Cyberfeminist International’ series at the Hybrid Workspace of documenta.<sup>37</sup> Julianne Pierce is the connecting link between the two groups. One of the founders of Old Boys Network, Cornelia Sollfrank, has recently published *Beautiful Warriors: Techno-Feminist Practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.<sup>38</sup>

Since *documenta X*, new centres for art and media have been established. These venues and festivals present and produce digital media projects and fuel the discussion around the influences this radical change in infrastructure has had on our living conditions.

- Barbican Centre, performing arts centre in London (founded in 1982)  
<http://vimeo.com/99732888>
- ZKM Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe (founded in 1989)  
<http://zkm.de/themen>
- Ars Electronic in Linz (Ars Electronica Center founded in 1996)  
<http://www.aec.at/news/>
- FACT Liverpool (founded in 2003) <https://www.fact.co.uk/>
- HeK Basel (founded in 2011) <https://www.hek.ch/>

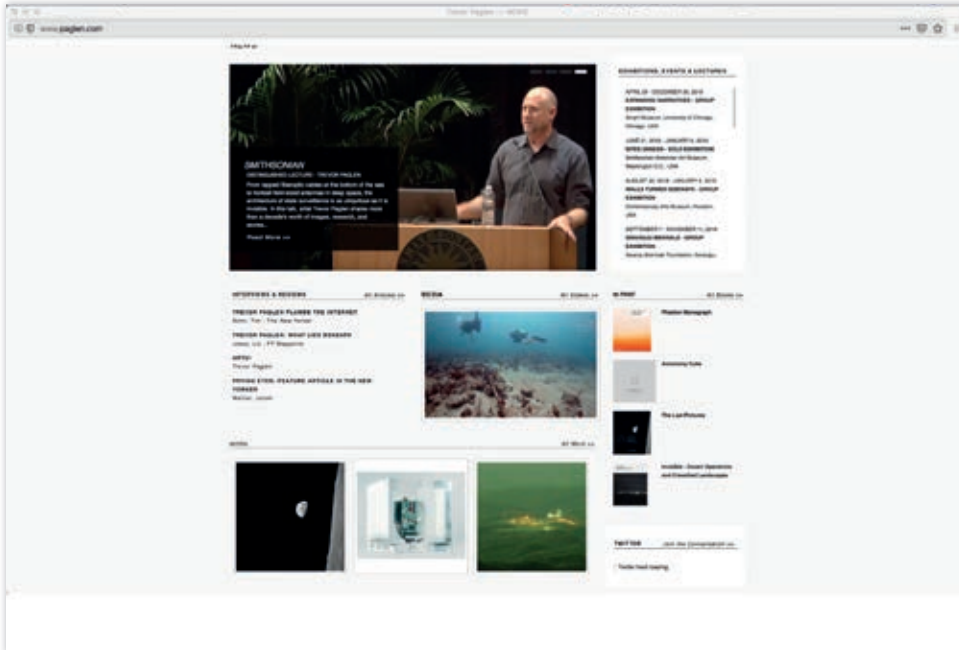
As mentioned in the beginning, Bernard Stiegler’s argument has been proven essential; the influence of our constant connectedness with digital devices and digital spaces has profoundly changed the formation of our subjectivity and of communities, that in 2020, when this article is written, it is obvious, that the bourgeois subject of central perspective, with the concept of autonomy as its foundation, is not applicable today. Felix Stalder reflects critically on the current situation: “Apparently many people consider it normal to be excluded from decisions that affect broad and significant areas of their life. The post-democracy of social mass media, which has deeply permeated the constitution of everyday life and the constitution of subjects, is underpinned by the ever-advancing post-democracy of politics. It changes the expectations that citizens have for democratic institutions, and it makes their increasing erosion seem expected and normal to broad strata of society.”<sup>39</sup> Insofar as algorithmicity is one of the three characteristics of the digital, it is observing and guiding civil society in a profound and deeply problematic way.

William Gibson’s statement, “The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed,”<sup>40</sup> becomes true, when Trump supporter and Silicon Valley millionaire Peter Thiel tries to prolong his life through blood exchange with younger individuals. Nevertheless, Stalder foresees other possible developments through communal

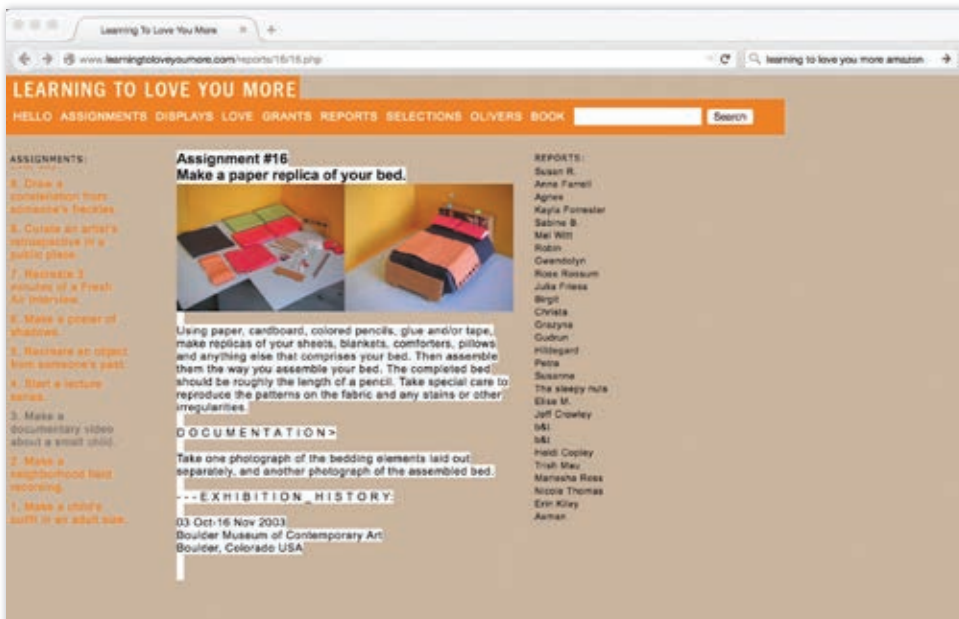


formations.<sup>41</sup> What he proposes is a reclaiming of the communal ways of a shared economy, which includes non-hierarchical decision-making and acting beyond market values. However, Stalder points out the precarity of these future possibilities:

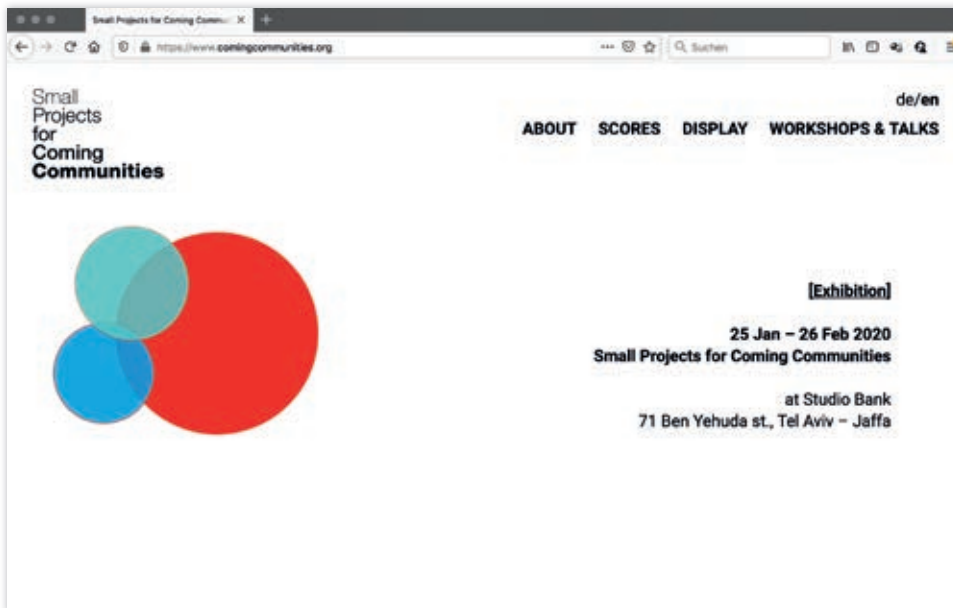
For now, the digital condition has given rise to two highly divergent political tendencies. The tendency toward ‘post-democracy’ is essentially leading to an authoritarian society. Although this society may admittedly contain a high degree of cultural diversity, and although its citizens are able to (or have to) lead their lives in a self-responsible manner, they are no longer able to exert any



www.paglen.com



www.learningtoloveyoumore.com



www.comingcommunities.org

influence over the political and economic structures in which their lives are unfolding. On the basis of data-intensive and comprehensive surveillance, these structures are instead shaped disproportionately by an influential few. The resulting imbalance of power had been growing steadily, as has income inequality. In contrast to this, the tendency toward commons is leading to a renewal of democracy, based on institutions that exist outside of the market and the state. At its core of this movement involves a new combination of economic, social and (ever-more pressing) ecological dimensions of everyday life on the basis of data-intensive participatory processes.<sup>42</sup>

In the arts, these conditions are met with different practices, for example, those of Trevor Paglen. He is currently exploring the material side of digital media: the big cables that cross oceans and satellites that function as surveillance apparatuses. What he wants from art is to see the historical moment in which we are living. He is pointing out how digital media can be used as weapon in cold wars, and he has found out about secret units of the American military. As he shows the hidden (by the military), extremely substantial materiality of the digital, he also shows the power struggles between states, companies, and economic powers. In his presentations, which can be all followed through his website, he also shows the maps of these enormous cables under the sea. So, he is proposing a counterhegemonic strategy to the unseen mapping of the world via data. Rudolf Frieling has pointed out the connection between mapping and power: “From the outset, maps have surveyed and inscribed territories in order to take possession of them, to occupy and colonize them. So historically speaking a map was not just a cognitive instrument but primarily an instrument in the competition for economic advantage and power.”<sup>43</sup>

Other artists use infrastructures and skills in a nearly curatorial way, such as Miranda July and Harrell Fletcher (Yuri Ono designed and managed the website), with *Learning to Love You More*. They used scores and the unlimited possibility to take part in a shared project to propagate a more communal understanding of culture. “From 2002 to its close in 2009, over 8,000 people participated in the project.”<sup>44</sup> Of course, this does not replace political movements towards the commons, but these projects help

to establish the idea of shared experiences, shared interests, a shared cultural space, and shared politics across nations. One of our own curatorial projects also opens up to participating and including new audiences and new ideas; see *Small Projects for Coming Communities*.<sup>45</sup> Even if these kind of projects are relatively small and do not at the moment play a role in a political struggle, they might help to lay a foundation for understanding new forms of communality, where the visual and the political will become close. These kind of more complex structures or research projects on the commons like “Creating Commons”<sup>46</sup> might provide a background to political struggles under the motto of FridaysForFuture<sup>47</sup> or Extinction Rebellion.<sup>48</sup>

## Notes

**1** I have relied on some important sources that I would like to generally acknowledge: Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, eds., “Art in the Age of Digital Distribution,” in *New Media Art* (London: Taschen, 2006), 6–25;

Oliver Grau, “New Media Art - Art History,” *Oxford Bibliographies* (2016), accessed 13 February 2020, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920105/obo-9780199920105-0082.xml>.

<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/> /ZKM)

**2** Tribe and Jana, eds., “Art in the Age of Digital Distribution,” 6–25.

**3** Ibid.

**4** Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Oxon: Routledge, 1964).

**5** Dieter Daniels, “Television—Art or Anti-art? Conflict and cooperation between the avant-garde and the mass media in the 1960s and 1970s,” accessed 21 May 2018, [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview\\_of\\_media\\_art/massmedia/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/massmedia/).

**6** Daniels practically manages to write this article without naming any female artists.

**7** Daniels, “Television—Art or Anti-art?”

**8** Ibid.

**9** Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “Kulturindustrie. Aufklärung als Massenbetrug,” in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York: Social Studies Association, 1944).

**10** See [https://www.amazon.de/Understanding-Media-Routledge-Classics-Paperback/dp/0415253977/ref=sr\\_1\\_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1525189968&sr=8-5&keywords=marshall+mcluhan](https://www.amazon.de/Understanding-Media-Routledge-Classics-Paperback/dp/0415253977/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1525189968&sr=8-5&keywords=marshall+mcluhan), accessed 1 May 2018.

**11** Paul Beynon-Davies, *Communication, the medium is not the message*, in *Significance*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2011, p.58-76. The abstract of the paper states the following:

“In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan famously coined the phrase, *the medium is the message* (McLuhan, 1994). By this he meant that communication media rather than the content of messages conveyed should be the focus of study. This influential statement has acquired something of the status of an aphorism: a universal statement of truth. But in our terms it makes a fundamental mistake: that of treating knowledge of communication media as equivalent to a complete understanding of communication. This chapter begins the process of explaining why communication is much more than media or channels of communication.”

**12** Daniel Pinheiro, *The medium is NOT the message*, 2017, see [https://www.academia.edu/35264801/The\\_Medium\\_is\\_NOT\\_the\\_Message\\_Daniel\\_Pinheiro\\_2017?auto=download](https://www.academia.edu/35264801/The_Medium_is_NOT_the_Message_Daniel_Pinheiro_2017?auto=download), “This text was presented in the context of the exhibition *The Medium is Not the Message* (Maus Hábitos, Porto, Portugal); The exhibition took place between 18 November and 10 December 2017. [...] Curated by José Alberto Gomes and André Covas.”

**13** McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

**14** See <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users-by-country/>, accessed 1 November 2018.

**15** Bernard Stiegler, *Von der Biopolitik zur Psychomacht (Frankfurt a.M.: Logik der Sorge 1.2., 2009)*.

**16** McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 269.

**17** Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik, “24-hour Happening,” Galerie Parnasse, See <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/24-h-happening/>.

“Charlotte Moorman and ‘Robot K-456’ accompany Nam June Paik on a European tour. Both perform Paik’s musical pieces (albeit in somewhat different ways), but their contribution to the ‘24-hour Happening’ is a joint effort. Charlotte Moorman plays the cello in her famous see-through plastic dress, occasionally diving into a barrel of water and then continuing, dripping wet, to play her instrument, or rides around on Paik’s back. According to Paik, however, there were interruptions due to human frailties: ‘Charlotte and I wanted to play a piece by John Cage, but shortly before we were due to begin, Charlotte fell into a sleep from which she was reluctant to awake, no matter how much I shouted and shook her. At my wit’s end, I pretended to sleep while playing La Monte Young’s piano pieces. Charlotte woke up at 2 in the morning, and they tell me she delivered a wonderful performance.’”

**18** Nam June Paik, “As Boring As Possible.” See <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/so-langweilig/>.

“Paik and Moorman staged a number of joint performances in the course of a European tour in 1965-1966. No objections were voiced in Europe to the best-known of these pieces, Paik’s ‘Opera sextronique’ in which Moorman discarded an item of clothing after each movement. In New York, however, it led to the arrest and subsequent trial of both artists in 1967.”

**19** “9 Evenings.” See <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de>.

**20** See <http://cyberneticserendipity.net/>.

**21** Felix Stalder, *The Digital Condition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 2-3.

**22** *Cybernetic Serendipity*, ICA London, 2 August to 20 October 1968.

**23** Laura Cottingham, *Not For Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s*, a video essay, 1998, cited from Apex Art, accessed 1 June 2019, <https://apexart.org/exhibitions/cottingham.php>.

**24** Randall Packer, “The Pepsi Pavilion: Laboratory for Social Experimentation,” in *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary after Film*, eds. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel, (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 145, cited from <http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/pepsi-pavillon/images/15/>, accessed 1 November 2018.

**25** Martin Jay, “scopic regimes of modernity, in Hal Forster, *Vision and Visuality*, 1999

**26** See <http://www.mediaartnet.org/works/pepsi-pavillon/images/15/>, accessed 1 November 2018.

**27** ARS ELECTRONICA ARCHIVE – PICTURES, <http://archive.aec.at/pic/>, accessed 1 November 2018.

The Pic Archive contains an extensive collection of pictures of Festival, Prix, Center, Futurelab and Export. A selected collection can also be found on Flickr (Ars Electronica Stream). Older pictures are from a now obsolete version of a custom-made image filing system that has been migrated to the new structure.

**28** See the interview by Jochen Wegner with William Gibson, “Ich hoffe, wir sind nicht in negative Utopien gefangen,” *Zeit Magazin*, 12 January 2017, <https://www.zeit.de/zeit-magazin/leben/2017-01/william-gibson-science-fiction-neuromancer-cyberspace-futurist/komplettansicht>.

**29** See Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Cyborg\\_Manifesto](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Cyborg_Manifesto), accessed 1 November 2018.

**30** Ibid.

- 31** “Les Immatériaux: Un entretien avec Jean-François Lyotard,” *CNAC Magazine* 26 (March 1985), 16. Translation by Stephanie Carwin.
- 32** Stalder, *The Digital Condition*.
- 33** Lyotard, catalogue accompanying *Les Immatériaux*, see Alexandra Wunderlich, “Les Immatériaux von Jean-François Lyotard. Der Philosoph als Kurator,”
- 34** McDowell, “Les Immatériaux.”
- 35** For a most interesting discussion of *documenta X*, *documenta11*, and *documenta 12*, see Oliver Marchart, *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld, Die documenta-Ausstellungen dX, D11, d12 und die Politik der Bientalisierung*, ed. Mariuas Babias, n.b.k. (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2008).
- 36** See *documenta X* website: [https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta\\_x](https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_x).
- 37** See [https://www.obn.org/obn\\_pro/fs\\_obn\\_pro.html](https://www.obn.org/obn_pro/fs_obn_pro.html).
- 38** Cornelia Sollfrank, *The Beautiful Warriors, Technofeminist Practice in the 21st Century* (Brooklyn, NY: AUTONOMEDIA, 2019), brings together seven current technofeminist positions from art and activism. In very different ways, they expand the cyberfeminist approaches of the 1990s and thus react to new forms of discrimination and exploitation. Gender politics are negotiated with reference to technology, and questions of technology are combined with questions of ecology and economy. Those taking different positions around this new techno-ecofeminism see their practice as an invitation to continue their social and aesthetic interventions. Book contributions by Christina Grammatikopoulou, Isabel de Sena, Femke Snelting, Cornelia Sollfrank, Spideralex, Sophie Toupin, hvale vale, and Yvonne Volkart.
- 39** Stalder, *The Digital Condition*, 146-147.
- 40** William Gibson, quoted in *The Economist*, 4 December 2003.
- 41** Stalder, *The Digital Condition*, 152 et seq.
- 42** *Ibid.*, 174.
- 43** Rudolf Frieling, “Mapping and Text,” Editorial, [http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/mapping\\_and\\_text/](http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/themes/mapping_and_text/) accessed 1 May 2019.
- 44** See <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com/>.
- 45** See <https://www.comingcommunities.org/>.
- 46** See <http://creatingcommons.zhdk.ch/>.
- 47** See <https://fridaysforfuture.de/>.
- 48** See <https://rebellion.earth/>.

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# Presenting, Mediating, and Collecting Media Art at HeK, House of Electronic Arts Basel

## Sabine Himmelsbach

In my contribution, I want to focus on the specific challenges an institution has to deal with when curating and collecting media art. I will do this based on my experience as the director of HeK, House of Electronic Arts Basel, an institution with a specific focus on media arts. Based on examples of the institution's three main trajectories—presenting, mediating and collecting digital art—I would like to show how we are addressing and shaping the public understanding of the social and political complexities of art and media technologies.

The often process-oriented nature of electronic and digital media poses numerous challenges to curatorial practice as well as to the institution itself—from the presentation, mediation, and collection to the preservation of the works. Strategies of presentation, collection, and preservation, which are tailored to a classic object—be it painting, sculpture, or installation—are often not suitable for dealing with media art. Distinct from traditional art forms, media artworks are essentially process-oriented, often immaterial (for example, only software), or networked systems. Digital culture consists of “practices, not objects.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the immateriality—especially network-based art—there are still many material components and technical hardware which must be taken into account when exhibiting, collecting, and preserving media art.

In our programming and collection activities, we focus on works that use digital technologies as tools for production and that take advantage of the digital medium's inherent characteristics. We showcase artworks that reflect the input of media technologies on our society, that describe our current condition in an age when digital processes are shaping our actions and inform our understanding of the world. Media art can take on numerous forms—from interactive installations to software, from virtual reality to locative media. It can be experienced in various forms of distribution—from displays within a museum, to displays on smartphones and tablets, or online.

HeK's activities focus on the presentation and mediation of digital culture and the new art forms of the Information Age. Founded in 2011, HeK soon began to assume the role of a nationally recognised centre for media art in Switzerland, covering the presentation, production, mediation, and collection of works in this field. After a transition phase in a temporary space, HeK moved into its current building in November 2014, which has been refurbished for the particular needs of the institution. We were fortunate to be involved during the whole construction phase and to be able to develop floor plans as well as the technical infrastructure together with the architects. This was quite important, since media art often requires a technical infrastructure that architects might not be aware of (including cabling, electricity, and network access points, location for the supply of technical equipment, etc.).

## Presenting

Media artworks often consist of a variety of different media and materials, the use of global networks or mobile media, which has had a fundamental impact on the role of the curator. The curator becomes a producer in the discussion with a diverse group of involved actors—from the artist and the programmer to the exhibition technicians and, of course, the audience. During the installation of an artwork, it is necessary to clarify the technical infrastructure and work-related presentation conditions. An exhibition often involves a reconfiguration of existing works, which might be adapted to a particular spatial situation—for example, presentation as a projection, on a flat screen, or on a kiosk computer. The size ratios might change, the equipment used can be different, and so on. Media competency and technical know-how are required, which is why an exhibition is hardly possible to maintain without constant technical support.

I would like to present several exhibitions that showcase these demands.

### **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: *Preabsence***

In Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's show, *Preabsence*, at HeK in 2016, the involvement of the audience was key. The Mexican-Canadian artist employs technological systems in many of his installations, which are primarily used for monitoring and controlling. Cameras, tracking systems, and biometric measuring processes have transformed the public space into a monitored space where every step and every activity can be registered and stored. Lozano-Hemmer makes use of the same technology in his interactive and participatory works, but instead of monitoring and controlling, he offers the exhibition visitor an opportunity for social interaction. He develops playful and poetic installations in which the recordings and data generated by the visitors document their presence and participation in a social event.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Redundant Assembly*; 2015. Installation view at HeK, 2016. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *1984x1984*, 2015. Installation view at HeK, 2016. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Call on Water*, 2016. Installation view at HeK, 2016. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK



I will discuss three works from the exhibition and explain the decision-making process that led to the final presentation in collaboration with Lozano-Hemmer.

The work *1984x1984* (2014) has so far only been shown on large flat screens. In the curatorial discussion with the artist, we opted for the work to be displayed as a projection. The work needed to be recalibrated exactly for the size of the wall in the HeK. Within the wall, a Kinect sensor had to be installed and hidden—this also contributed to the decision as to where the work could be placed. The importance of mentioning this is the influence the physical presentation and the effects of space have on how digital works are shared and experienced. When entering the room, an intuitive interaction took place. The colourful projection that consists of hundreds of numbers changes within the silhouette of the viewers and the otherwise random numbers of house numbers registered by Google Street View changed to a 1984 collection as a reference to George Orwell's pioneering book of the same name, which describes the end of privacy. In his installation, Lozano-Hemmer shows, in a very poetic way, how this is already the case today.

For *Redundant Assembly* (2016), we installed two glued footprints on the ground as the point where the visitor could interact with the work. The work used their face and that of other visitors from six camera perspectives at the same time. The result was a composite image of either one's own portrait from six perspectives or a merged portrait of two people also seen from six perspectives simultaneously. The technology used for the two presented works consists of commercial hardware: the Kinect sensor, a projector, a flat panel display, two panels with inserted cameras, and specially programmed software. The hardware is interchangeable and is dependent on the current industry standards and the rapid change of the technological infrastructure. In that respect, media artworks are more context-dependent than other works of contemporary art.

The last example, the work *Call on Water* (2016), was created for this exhibition. It creates breathable poetry using an array of ultrasonic atomisers. An ultrasonic atomiser vaporises water into superfine steam. The poem "A Draft of Shadows" and other poems by Mexican poet Octavio Paz reflect on themes of water and its transformation into language. The poem's content becomes tangible, as its words ascend from a pool in the form of water vapor. The words are seen briefly, then disappear. The work had only been tested in the studio; when it was installed at HeK, we faced several problems because of the different physical environment—different amperes in the power systems, different types of water (distilled instead of normal water), and many other issues. It was a joint process to find out what had changed and how to find a solution within the new technical environment for the perfect aesthetic presentation of the piece.

### ***My Boyfriend Came Back From The War: Online Since 1996***

An interesting example for the presentation of historical works of Net Art is the exhibition *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War: Online Since 1996*, which was centred on the seminal work of the same name by the Russian net artist Olia Lialina and included remixes and responses to the work over the last twenty years. *My Boyfriend Came Back From The War* is an example of the pioneering period of Net Art. Lialina is among the first artists to explore the Internet's artistic possibilities. Her work broke new ground—both as Net Art and as an interactive narrative. It focuses on the story of two people who are trying to talk with each other about a war that has just ended. The work's historical significance lies in the formal aspects of the use of hypertext in a new form of narration, where the online user clicks through the story and plays an active role. But another central aspect of the work's effective power is in the universality of its story.

And that is what has inspired artists for more than twenty years. Lialina has collected twenty-seven versions so far in what she calls the *Last Real Net Art Museum*, an online archive that has become a work in itself. The selection of thirteen works, which were shown at the HeK, reflects the development of the World Wide Web as medium and technology—from its rarity to its now daily use. The various stages of the Internet's development are traced in the project's structure and technical constitution: from HTML to Flash, dotcom to e-commerce, from the website to the app.

In order to do justice to the original 'look and feel' as experienced by the users in the mid 1990s and also to illustrate the developments leading to today's ubiquitous Network—accessibility through mobile devices—the works in the exhibition were presented on equipment of that era. Apart from the artistic works, it was also important for the exhibition to discuss the technical changes—the hardware and software—and the rapid technological development visible to the viewer. Regarding the hardware, we are grateful to the Department of Conservation and Restoration of the Bern University of the Arts, which helped provide historical equipment. To create the sense of authenticity, we also needed to reproduce the historical conditions of the Internet. In the early days, it took a long time to load an image; a click did not bring you to a new frame within fractions of a second. Therefore, all the historical works in the exhibition have been emulated. It was the software emulation that allowed visitors to the exhibition to appreciate the poetry of the historical works and intrinsic quality of the media as they have been perceived in their time. The tension and silences between the two protagonists in Lialina's story can only be experienced in the slowness of the connectivity of that time; the protagonists' waiting, their love and loss become apparent within the formal qualities of the work, and part of its beauty is lost if experienced via our fast Internet connection of today.



*My Boyfriend Came Back From The War. online since 1996.* Installation view at HeK, 2016. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK

### *The Unframed World*

Another example is the show *The Unframed World*, curated by Tina Sauerländer in 2017 for HeK, which was one of the first shows solely on the topic of Virtual Reality in a museum context. It illuminated to questions surrounding Virtual Reality's artistic use. In nine works, different approaches and uses of the medium were presented—from the high-end product HTC-Vive to the modestly priced Virtual Reality tool Google Cardboard. The curatorial concept focused on showing works that have a physical element that connects the VR world with the environment in the exhibition space. Thus, in the exhibition, VR could be experienced as a meta-media, which extended different artistic practices into the digital space—from painting to performance or sculpture. Virtual worlds of images and real space were entangled with the works' physical manifestations—one involved the other or referred to it.

In Rachel Rossin's installation, *Just a Nose* (2016), the viewer emerges on the rough surface of the open sea. In the real surroundings, paintings on the wall hang close to the water's moving surface. In VR, similar painted fabric pieces float around. The user can grab them with a horn-like nose reminiscent of a sailing ship's jib boom. Elements from the real and the virtual layers are transferred onto the other and create a unity,



*My Boyfriend Came Back From The War. online since 1996*. Installation view at HeK, 2016. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK



Rachel Rossin, *Just a Nose*. Installation view at HeK, 2017. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK



Mélodie Mousset and Naem Baron, *HanaHana*, 2016. Screenshot, Photo and © Mélodie Mousset and Naem Baron

just like the two worlds merge in our real, daily lives. Rossin uses digital data that she transforms into paintings, which then find their way in a digitalized form into the VR space. They reveal abstracted, deformed versions of real objects of the artist's surrounds.

In the virtual world of *HanaHana* (2016), created by the Swiss artist Mélodie Mousset, the user grows arms with hands as chain-like plants in a desert-like sandbox. The title refers to the protagonist Nico Robin of the Manga series *One Piece*, who—thanks to the power of the Hana-Hana fruit—can infinitely sprout and reproduce body parts outside her body. The repetition of Hana (Japanese for flower or bloom) refers to the replication of the hands in VR as well as to the self-reproductive system of nature. The endless copying of one's own body parts (the self) reduces the meaning of the original and of the individual self in general— especially in the digital and virtual realm without any 'originals'.

Another example is the virtual world of *Mercury* (2016) by the German artist duo Banz & Bowinkel, which examines the conditions of materials and substances in the virtual space and in relation to earth's physical laws. Several islands could be explored and traversed via several narrow bridges with the help of the pointer. Fear of heights made this impossible for some of the visitors. Throughout the duration of the show, several



Banz & Bowinkel, *Mercury*, 2016. Installation view at HeK, 2017. Photo: Franz Wamhof, © HeK

staff were in the exhibition space to support visitors when they encountered problems—for example the fear of walking over the virtual bridges in *Mercury*, but also to support them on how to use the pointer and move within the virtual worlds, put on the equipment, explain the use of the mobile phone with the Google Cardboard Tool, etc.

Virtual Reality means experiencing works of art, instead of merely viewing them. In Virtual Reality, there is no longer any distance from the presented world we experience. One is in the middle of it and becomes the centre of a digitally created world. VR is often described as an “empathy machine,”<sup>2</sup> as it allows one to dive directly into action. Here, the art acts more as a critique-enabling entity. The works presented in this exhibition are not about an empathic experience, but instead about social feedback showing how the new medium has fundamentally changed our sense of space and time, social, private, and public life, and the relationship between artist and user.

### Mediating

Mediating what is seen and experienced within the exhibitions is important. HeK sees itself as a place for discussion and as an experimental field in which media education and media reflection are carried out. An essential part of the activities is therefore the education programme, which is designed as independent and not just a supplement to the exhibition activities. Objectives of the education programmes are learning communicatively by participating in creative, aesthetic, and technological processes and thus mediating conceptual and formal knowledge. We would like to promote a dialogical and active exploration of contents, themes and works of exhibitions in a theoretical and practical way—also in direct collaboration with artists. Mediation is understood as “production of meaning” and as “communication.” We try to create an awareness of the media technologies that we are using in our daily lives and a self-determined use that goes beyond the use of consumer goods. For us, digital media



*Critical Make. Turning Functionality.* Talk by Gordan Savic and Selena Savic within the exhibition. Photo: Lukas Zitzer, © HeK

are not primarily interesting as techniques, but above all as places and platforms of participatory cultural forms and practices, which is the focal point of our education program and concept. We take this as a vantage point for connecting technological, social, and artistic questions. Sometimes even an exhibition itself derives from the conceptual approach of mediation and education. An example is *Critical Make*, an exhibition and festival format that hosted workshops, performances, and talks. In the middle of the exhibition, there was a stage that was constantly activated with lectures, workshops, and performances. The theme of *Critical Make* was the question of self-making as a means of learning, exchange, and cultural production. We asked questions like, What are the artists doing? What is the role of the spectator? Therefore, doing and production—from the side of the artists as well as the visitors were central points.

With *Critical Make: Turning Functionality*, we wanted to throw different perspectives on the DIY culture and their links with the arts and their political and pop cultural dimensions. The pioneers, hackers, and hobbyists of the DIY movement are indispensable in the context of the media arts. In its conception of a critical and self-determined media practice, the educational programme at HeK also refers to them and often cooperates with actors from the local DIY scene. The idea for the project was to integrate educational aspects and activate the space with discussions, talks, and artist presentations to reflect “the idea that thinking is a hands-on process,” as Roger Whitson claims in his presentation on “Maker Culture.”



Internet Yami-Ichi at HeK, 2017 Photo: Lukas Zitzer, © HeK



Internet Yami-Ichi at HeK, 2017 Photo: Lukas Zitzer, © HeK



Addie Wagenknecht „Painting with Drones“ Workshop at HeK, 2016. Photo: Lukas Zitzer, © HeK



Aram Bartholl, Kill Your Phone Workshop at HeK, examples from a school class. Photo: Alessandra von Aesch, © HeK

Another example is the “Internet Yami-ichi” event that took place in 2017. It’s an Internet flea market where goods and services related to Internet culture are offered for sale. The Internet Yami-ichi emphasises an active form of participation. It encourages visitors to introduce themselves, to produce and show something—so, rather a “bring-in cultural participation,” in contrast to the generally customary “take-out cultural participation” of education formats. Workshops with artists take place on a regular basis. They encourage a hands-on approach and active use of media technologies, and they also invite to reflect on the digital tools we use. A playful example would be the “Painting with Drones” workshop by Addie Wagenknecht that invited kids to use drones to create paintings, or the “Kill your Phone” workshop conceived by Aram Bartholl, where visitors were invited to sew a small mobile phone pocket that shields their phones from surveillance.

### Collecting

In addition to continuous exhibition activities, HeK is also building up a collection of digital art, focusing on born-digital-art, and specifically on artworks that are net-based and networked. This means we no longer deal with a static object that can be “stabilised” in the classical sense, but rather with a boundless practice that is embedded in networked systems. These works—which use the Internet not as a tool but as an artistic medium—are challenging traditional notion of preservation. Traditionally, preservation means the fixation of a work, based on authenticity and integrity. But net-based and networked artworks are fluid by nature: they are as unstable as the networks in which they are embedded. They are beholden to industries, to a fast-changing technological environment and are limited by other parameters beyond the museum’s reach. Conservation practices must acknowledge these performative and processual qualities.

More and more software-based artworks are entering museum collections, but as curator Christiane Paul points out, for decades, the relationship between digital art and the mainstream art world and institutions has been notoriously uneasy.<sup>3</sup> Joanna Phillips, conservator at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, stated during the third *Tech Focus Conference* at the museum last year that the Guggenheim collection includes only 22 software-based artworks, which is the equivalent to 0.3% of the total collection. Nevertheless, the institution is doing groundbreaking work with regard to digital preservation strategies. “Software-based art is perceived as a risky area,”<sup>4</sup> says Pip Laurenson, Head of Collection Care Research at Tate. She supposes that the reason for the limited collecting activities in this area in museums is mainly due to the “lack of established documented practice for the conservation” of these works. I think it is exactly this quality and expertise that give institutions like HeK their *raison d’être*, with their expertise in handling software-based art and their experience in meeting artists demands regarding technical infrastructure, equipment, or maintenance.

Building up a collection of media arts and research addressing the ‘digitality’ of our society is part of HeK’s agenda. Our collection is still in its infancy, but it is growing steadily and reached more than sixty works by the end of 2017. Of course, for such a small institution—no more than six people work full-time at HeK—preservation is a tremendous task but nevertheless an important one. We involve many different experts in the management and monitoring process, in order to handle those complex and fluid artworks—from our technicians and those responsible for the information infrastructure of the institution, to the external expertise for inventory-taking. When the institution moved into a new building, it was not only the physical infrastructure



that was newly built. We also redesigned our virtual information infrastructure so we could host and care for net-based artworks. These works are the focus of our collection at a time when few museums are collecting such works—one exception is the *Art Base* of the digital arts organisation Rhizome, which is associated with the New Museum in New York.

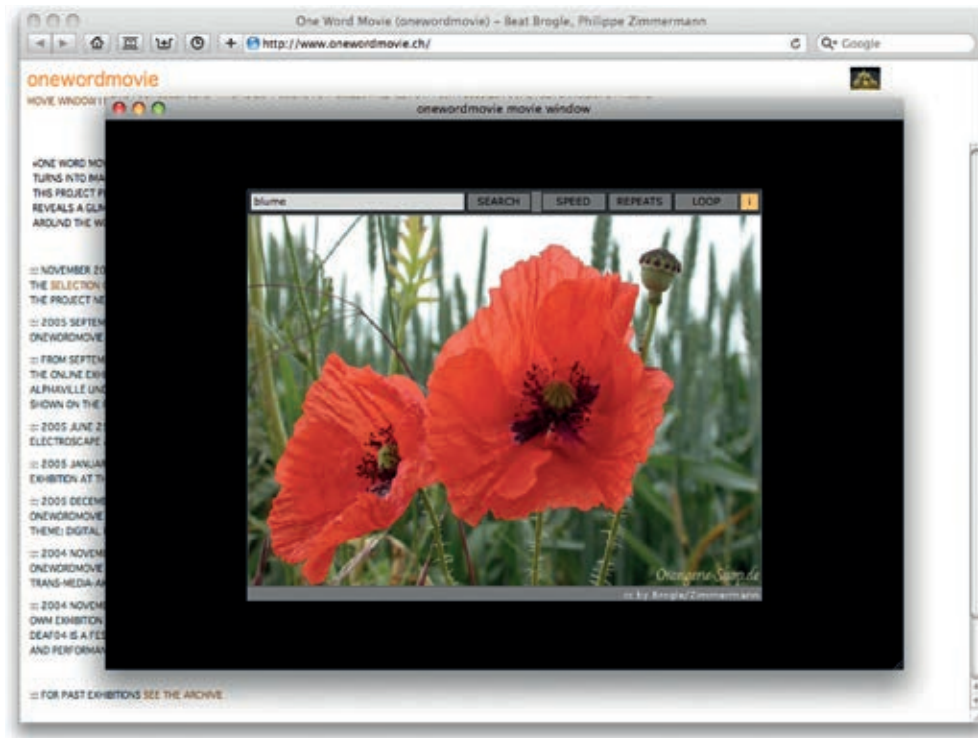
Preserving those net-based artworks means preserving behaviors, not only artefacts. An enormous threat is technical obsolescence. In our world of rapidly changing technological formats, there is no way of knowing how long hard- and software devices will remain functional, how long software-based tools will be supported or are downward compatible, for example. We are dependent on an industry that is based on and nourished by continuous change, promoting a new version and products in ever-shorter periods of time. For researcher Jon Ippolito, born-digital equals “born almost already obsolete.”

The last fifteen years have seen many collaborative research groups and projects dealing with the issues of preserving media art. They have helped museums adapt to the idea that an artwork can no longer be presented with the original material or equipment. The *Variable Media Network* at the Guggenheim Museum has done groundbreaking work with their focus on the idea of “endurance by variability.” They set the standards for the four main approaches to preserving media art: storage or hardware preservation, emulation, migration, and re-interpretation. One of their valuable outputs is the *Variable Media Questionnaire*, which today is used and promoted by the *Forging the Future* alliance.<sup>5</sup>

Another project is *Matters in Media Art: Collaborating Towards the Care of Time-Based Media*, a joint project by Tate, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, MoMA in New York, and the New Art Trust.<sup>6</sup> They provide helpful guidelines for the logistics of acquiring and lending media artworks. Many more could be named, and I am mentioning only one more example from Switzerland, *Aktive Archive* (Active Archives), a project initiated by the Bern University of the Arts that dates back to 2004 and is focused on documentation, preservation, and restoration as well as on storage of diverse forms of media art.<sup>7</sup>

But the handling and preservation of net-based artworks is still a rather new field. HeK has been part of the tri-national research project *Digital Art Conservation*, led by the ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, with the only net-based project among the ten case studies that have been explored. We continue our research and networking in that field by establishing the event series *Conservation Piece(s)*, which aims to start a dialogue with specialists and experts from various fields, to collaboratively deal with the pressing issues of preserving media art. We hope we can foster a dialogue and help build regional and national knowledge communities here in Switzerland and also with international partners; to develop a “network of caretakers” or a “community of concern,” as media curator and researcher Annet Dekker calls it.<sup>8</sup>

On ongoing case study for preservation is the work *onewordmovie* by Beat Brogle and Philippe Zimmermann from 2003, an important example of net-based artistic practice in Switzerland from the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which entered the HeK collection in 2015. *onewordmovie* is an online platform that organizes the flood of images on the Internet into an animated film based on user-supplied terms. A search for a particular word creates image results that are turned into a movie. Using a specially programmed search engine, users can call up images from the Internet that match



Beat Brogle and Philippe Zimmermann, *onewordmovie*, 2003. Screenshot, Photo and © Beat Brogle and Philippe Zimmermann

their search term. The project's search engine is built on top of the most popular image search facilities available on the Internet—in this case Google. Supplied with a search term, the engine produces a “hit list.” This list can be several thousand images long, depending on the term. The images on this “hit list” provide the “raw material” for the movie. Following the ranking of the “hit list,” the images are animated into a film in real-time, following a fixed and predetermined score, which consists of a series of interwoven loops. Each film has an individual trailer displaying the search term as the title, and each film lasts until the ‘raw material’ is used up.

The challenge for preservation is “distributed obsolescence” due to the boundless or un-contained structure of the work, which uses technological infrastructure and data services of other big online companies that the artist does not control. The process of preservation is not completed yet. The strategy includes migration or reprogramming of the work and its parameters. The goal is to find a solution that would keep the work accessible online, keep the functionality intact, and simultaneously keep the historical aesthetic of the piece intact.

## Notes

**1** Digital conservator Dragan Espenschied, quoted by Zachary Kaplan in his text, “The Accidental Archivist: Criticism on Facebook and How to Preserve It,” <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2014/may/29/preserving-facebook-criticism/>.

**2** Jennifer Alsever, “Is Virtual Reality the Ultimate Empathy Machine?,” *Wired*, accessed 3 February 2020, <https://www.wired.com/brandlab/2015/11/is-virtual-reality-the-ultimate-empathy-machine/>.

**3** Christiane Paul, ed., *A Companion to Digital Art* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

4 Pip Laurenson, "Old Media, New Media? Significant Difference and the Conservation of Software-Based Art," in Beryl Graham, *New Collecting: Exhibiting and Audiences after New Media Art* (London and New York: Routledge 2014), 73.

5 <http://variablemediaquestionnaire.net/>.

6 <http://mattersinmediaart.org/>.

7 <https://www.hkb.bfh.ch/en/research/forschungsschwerpunkte/fspmateriaetaet/aktivearchive2/>.

8 Annet Dekker in her presentation at HeK, <http://www.hek.ch/en/program/events-en/event/conservation-pieces-conference-on-the-preservation-of-performative-media/0/1517871600.html>.

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**Sabine Himmelsbach** Director of HeK, Basel, Sabine Himmelsbach studied art history, medieval history and cultural anthropology at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich, Germany. From 1993 to 1996, she worked for galleries in Munich and Vienna, and later became the Project Manager for exhibitions and symposia at the Steirischer Herbst Festival (Styrian Autumn Festival) in Graz, Austria. From 1999 to 2005, she was Exhibition Director at the ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. There, Sabine Himmelsbach was responsible for exhibitions like *Iconoclash*, *FUTURE CINEMA*, and *Making Things Public*. Her own curatorial projects at the ZKM include exhibitions like *Temporal Values: From Minimal to Video*; *Fast Forward: Media Works from the Goetz Collection*; *Coolhunters: Youth Cultures between the Media and the Market*; and *Resonances: The Electromagnetic Bodies Project*. In October 2005, Sabine Himmelsbach took over the position of Artistic Director of the Edith Russ Site for Media Art in Oldenburg, Germany. There, she has curated exhibitions like *Visibilities\_Between Facts and Fictions*; *PLAYBACK\_Simulated Realities*; *SOUND//BYTES*; *Ecomedia*; and, currently, *JUST PLAY: Music as a Social Practice*. As a writer, she has contributed to catalogues and magazines. She has lectured internationally on topics related to media art and contemporary culture.

# “Non-Place” and Movement: An Interview with Amanda Beech

## Paul Stewart

**Paul Stewart:** To Frame this conversation with you, I wanted to discuss the way your work interacts with digital mediums but also to further examine the exhibition held at The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, *Covenant Transport Move or Die* (21 October 2016 - 29 January 2017). I was reading over the text by Reza Negarestani, *The Children of the Eleatic Hydra*, which was commissioned as part of the exhibition, and I found a particular section really interesting which was about, and I quote: “The tyranny of the place, which is at once afforded and ensnared by the gravity of the global capitalism is to reinvent thought in terms of a new material condition that opposes the old one, the non-place,” and it was just that bit, that use of the word “non-place” that related to my reflections on the work. My mind automatically made connections with the text that appears as a graphic within the video which reads “This is not real.” The two together brought to the fore the meaning of the avatar/actors, five different roles in the work that take up the main screen of the video work. I want to know more about how this term “non-place” functions and if its function with respect to the physical and the digital are understood as one and the same, considering this point through terms such as site and reality as well as the political connotations surrounding digital communities and art practice.

**Amanda Beech:** Yes, the video work and the *Copper Plates* that accompany it were strongly motivated by the traditions of location and site in politics and in the history of art, and wanted to connect with how these comprehensions of place or “non-place” have been key to claiming a particular kind of agency for art. Let’s try and take a few of these points at a time, because you’re traversing a set of terms to ask about what is crucial now to both art and politics. So, first, the way in which we understand our reality in which we exist, cognitively and empirically, informs the way we’re going to make art, right? So, that’s my basic premise, or starting point of a kind of realist art that holds an epistemological question: how we can take seriously the means by which we express reality if reality is inaccessible to us?

Second, in relation to the term “non-place”, we could say that we have valorisations of this term that go on across right- and left-wing theory... or right- and left-wing principles. The notion of the “non-place” was once captured by the Left to oppose what was seen to be the concretized, stable, and monumental forms of power in the world. We see this in Situationism and Augue, for example. But this was prosecuted at the level of formal difference, where one sensibility was opposed to the other in the name of the political and therefore led to disastrous contradictions. For example, a principle of capital in liberalism, and more thoroughly in neoliberalism, is mobility. These politics adopt the ethos that we should always be on the move and that this mobility is correlative to our happiness and success. This mobility is also the key to our self-understanding as free subjects who can self-determine. As such, the notion of being unmoored is seen as a positive and necessary form of life in capital. This principle foregrounds the importance of life as a system that is imbued with a dynamic spirit of flux. However, as we know, mobility manifests and expresses a myth of freedom and also organizes us to this principle. This notion of dynamism is also a primary identification for vitalist theory and post-structural principles of groundlessness and ontological instability. For instance, we are now accustomed to the claims that are made in readings of Deleuzian theory and capitalist aesthetics, whether these claims have integrity or not, that privilege horizontalist and networked forms of mobility and place-lessness. The things I’m saying here are pretty obvious to us now. We all know about the conflation of left-wing vitalism with right-wing principles, especially when we think about the discussions over the past few years, as well as more recently around Alt-Right. So, returning to the exhibition, the motivation of the work is hinged upon the way in which the principles and ideas that inform what we could call left-wing critique traverse the standards of right- and left-wing positioning and any consequential action. With that in mind, the idea of what is Right and Left is shown as a problem for us to consider again by the work, or how the stakes of these are complicated at least.

To develop this, it was important that a view of the political was housed in the work as a kind of problem to be complained about *by the work*, but this address against certain ideas is not its ‘end’ or goal, because at the same time, the piece tries to conjure a territory that can transcend these binaries in order to rationalise the very way in which we engage with reality, somehow, it seeks to provide a dimension of thought material so as to produce a space that precedes the political or is in front of the political but does not forget that it is always constructing a relation to it through its assessment of it.

To get to the work and this term “non-place” in more detail, perhaps it’s worth rehearsing some of our last points with a view of the famous book by Marc Augé. In this, he talks about airports and the liminal ambiguous sites of aporia. The history of these “non-places” are valorised as alternative “othered” forms of space, since they occupy what we could identify as a gap, or fissure, that would enable “other” things to take place. These spaces have a sense of alterity, which conjures the idea that a location can be addressed outside of normativity. I’ve always had a concern about this theory and its tenability today, and it’s kind of interesting that it is connected to a Situationist critique that also was shared by the work of Michel de Certeau. In de Certeau’s work and others, we see the idea that politics requires a periphery, and this could be made manifest by the wanderings of urban walking or other apparently non-functional or unnoticed activities. Such psycho-geographies valorised temporality and ephemeral space as the support for a kind of non-representationalism that would counter dominant power. This escapism within the conditions of a system all seemed a little bit too fantastical for me, and I was interested in the way that art practice had consistently privileged access to these “other” spaces and presented them as spaces of movement, time, duration, change, flexibility, and mobility that were argued to be and go beyond the conditions of dominant power. In this case, escaping representation meant escaping power. But where did this leave art—on the outside of power? Or, was this to claim a kind of power beyond power? If it’s the latter, then any claim to power would seem to resolve itself in zones of privacy, where any claim to power would be so abstract, it would be banal. That was a problem for me, and it’s the same problem that I attempt to have in the background for the whole of the video work and the *Copper Plates*. This attitude toward site and time means that we’ve got a kind of problem of the Left, in that a critique cannot identify itself against the mechanisms and methods of capitalist power.

I wanted to bring together this format of the problem as it can be seen across different discourses and to excavate it through these avatars that my actors portrayed in the live action parts of the video work. These avatars also appear to be on a trajectory; i.e. *going somewhere*, but also coming from a “non-place”. They are filmed in a classic “non-place”: in a gap between warehouses near a train line, which takes the goods trains across America. Rather than claim that their aesthetic location gives them some kind of authority, I wanted to look at this very notion of site as the cliché of alternative forms of authority, and often the site of the subterranean movement. It is an image popularised in pop music videos, and we know this aesthetic pretty well. However, this group is always situated within a very strong perspectival position where they can narrate the world, and so their metaphysical status is defined in a set of normativities. What I mean by this is that the characters occupy a non-place. This is the vantage point of their understanding. This enables their traversal of empirical spaces that have been historically established as candidates for the non-place. It is my hope that, in this navigation over these spaces, the characters assert a kind of cognitive dissonance that destroys the claim that these lived spaces are equal to the ‘non’. But the empirical and visceral aesthetic experience is not forgotten or forsaken in pursuit of this cerebral conceptual landscape—and we get highway shots and train shots and an aesthetics of a camera that is in constant mobility. The cinematography that I worked with employed a kind of rule throughout the work where the camera acts as a centre-point. It conducts a gravitational pull, so to speak, on its surroundings, where the shots are mostly taken in constant rotation on an axis that is circular. This acts as a form of rule-based system of operation and production that is quite stable for the work, or consistent, as most shots are in flow on this rotational axis, but the experience of watching this also engenders a sense of instability for the viewer at the same time. At specific points, the concept of gravity and order are pushed further where the images in the work are literally upside down. This confusion is iterated in the script. The language that the avatars are employing is really on the one hand clear and literal, and on the other hand it could be read as really impenetrable and disorientating. I’m really motivated by these conditions of work that can be didactic and instructive in a literal way, while the very experience of didacticism can often be bewildering.

I wanted to explore these different experiential or sensory and intellectual forms of understanding in an installation format. This is my question of and to “non-place”, but maybe you want to say something that connects to your ideas, about how this view could link up to your later question on the digital and physical...

**PS:** The connection between sites the characters occupy and the depictions of travel and, as you say, the rotational axis of the work engender instability and make a literal use of techniques to depict how a place can seem regular and unsettling at the same time. I think what was interesting for me regarding what you just said was around aspects of mobility. I do not mean mobility equating to speed but how movement can become a consumption of mobility, or more how a capitalist ideology of production can equate to a trajectory that inherently consumes. As I said in my first question, the navigation has a different sensory and oratory experience to communicating or moving through a landscape physically, but I see a parallel in the two through the term consumption—of an experience, an existence, a moment. I think I am trying to see movement online as into the device of multiple levels of labour and experience.

Focussing more on the work, there is a connection to what you were saying in terms of a “non-place”. The avatars in the work could be seen to come from a “non-place”, as you have said, but at the same time they have a didactic functionality. What I am alluding to is where the idea of consumption exists within the work... Is it more about consuming the space which you traverse, whether that’s fast or slow, or is it about consuming data or content? I don’t know if that is of interest to you...

**AB:** When you say “consumption”, I think of buying, buying into/desiring. When you talk about this idea of mobility, what it seems you’re describing is that mobility is a desirable idea that we can empirically purchase. I can literally buy that with my card or whatever, so I buy into it as a principle of life...

**PS:** Yes, where mobility across both physical and digital experiences—the mobilisation of our voices now in a video chat context as this interview is being conducted via Skype as one example. When I think about the ideas, you’re talking about in your practice in regard to digital communities; I feel that the mobility that happens is conducted by the system and not necessarily the individual.

**AB:** OK, this seems to be addressing the ideology of mobility through digital communication and systems that for now are entrenched within global capital, but also you are asking about how we might think of agency, authority, and so on when we are not always the ones who mobilise, or instigate action, but rather are being interpellated to mobility. For instance, I just mentioned that it’s important that my characters occupy a kind of transcendental space that affords them a kind of luxury of vantage points, knowledge, and vision, but at the same time this vision is twisted within the vistas of capitalist Kafkaesque landscapes of Dairy Queen, Coors Light, car dealerships, and the paraphernalia of capitalist mundanity that occupies the same territories as the non-places that had been seen as our redemption from capital. In this instance, occupying a transcendental position in the world, so to speak, does not hinder the possibility of saying something in the world, and speaking to the world. But this is a destructive force, for it renders the myths that have supported many aspects of belief false. In this sense, we have one form of mobility set against another.

But to think about your point on mobility in a historical and socio-political sense, we can say that technological advances in computation, industry, and mobility for humanity, our ideological notion of the nature of life and its drive in the social has not progressed or changed very much in the last century when it comes to the primacy of mobility. We can see this globally, but most specifically in America in terms of the old propaganda that tells you that getting your car out on the freeway is the equivalent to living “The American Dream”—to expressing your freedom in public, but all the while you are contained in the private universe of the car. We know that the car and other forms of industrial transport are uniquely able to index an old-fashioned idea of individuated freedom. So, we live with this today, abiding by myths from analogue industrialisations of the early twentieth century. A Fordist moment persists right into our post-Fordist immaterialist ecology. We could say the same about colonialism, where despite Empire retracting its empirical base in the occupation of Africa, for example, the reaches and thrust of global finance persist in enslaving and controlling populations and governments to the point that this form of colonialism renders the populations that do the colonising increasingly in the colonised form. I’m trying to think about how those old industrial images of trains and cars and haulage, and the physical effort of movement is just as idealised and is a necessary part of an ideology of digital capital that we can see now in global virtual

technologies. So, cognitively and politically in these respects, we haven't gone very far!

**PS:** So, we haven't gone very far, but we've just gone faster.

**AB:** Yes, we do see that speed is still essentialised as a capitalist, desirable commodity. So, what is it then to move or change? How does change counter or can be seen to be non-relational to speed? And is this speed another way of expressing a fascination with the present? Given the fact that the idealisation of mobility is ultimately a constraining and non-generative condition, and when I say constraining, I mean that it's habituated; then what is it to *move*? What is it to think change? I guess that's what all my practice, including this exhibition that we're talking about, is trying to deal with.

But on another note, there was something that you were saying in your opening question that made me think of how the avatars function in the work. You seemed to be asking about how we might understand the agency of the virtual or the agency of the image, or the agency of the construct. As an audience, what we're looking at in the work, quite literally, is a set of instructions that come from the artwork. They come from a model; instructions come from the construction. Knowing that this is a construction, well, does that undermine the value of the instruction? I'd like to propose that it does not. Instead, this positive relation to the image as opposed to what we see in traditional theories of mobility or the “non-place” that we have talked about (where the real and art are equivalent in empirical spaces that are designated as the ‘non’ by dint of them being unregulated by traditional forms of capital). What I'm trying to think about is how the work as a model, a construction, has agency without making art equivalent to the real or arguing that the real is impossible for the image to address. Saying that something is virtual or unreal or artificial is a banal gesture and serves to undermine its power at a too generalised level. This way of destabilising power runs aground when its logic leads us to assert that “nothing is real” because “everything is constructed”. This is the weak side of art's antirealist tradition—a move that only serves to undermine art in the process, because all images including art are made false.

**PS:** The relationship between “construction” and “nothing” and art's ability to undermine its process and to be made false, are you suggesting that as an anti-capitalist trope or a tool to question what is con-

structed? What you mention here makes me think of how the avatar has decided not to invest in capital. The characters are aware of the “non-place” and choose not to contribute to the capitalist forms of mobility. It's something I have been trying to question in my own work around ideas of un-learning. Where un-learning is not the process of forgetting but, quite the contrary, to remember intently. The avatars have an agency in the work, and this does not make a distinction between individuated ideas of freedom and the system/world that you've constructed with the work.

**AB:** Well, I think that's what Reza's essay speaks to in part—that is, how can agency or authority emerge from within a system of norms that is capable of re-orientating the system itself. And I think, from reading his text, that's what he's speaking to in response to the work.

**PS:** It's like the idea of algorithms being able to build themselves or that the system learns itself to the point at which it no longer needs other systems to support it.

**AB:** Absolutely. I was saying earlier that when I diagnosed the problem of mobility at an ideological level, there are consistencies across the industrial Fordist world and the post-Fordist one. In the world of the digital, we are under an illusion that we have exceeded the world of perspectives, positions, of binaries, or dualisms and therefore also the desire to escape dominance, because apparently, we don't have to make these distinctions—we are all horizontal. This is where we get the early dreams of the Internet as a place for new anarchic freedoms and fantasies about neutrality returning to occupy the concept of the digital in-itself, whereas previously fantasies of neutrality were sought in the liminal and the fissures; the digital became the liminal as an infinite field. The state of global economics today reminds us of the failure of this dream evidenced in the monopoly of financial models and corporate giants that organise our interaction with the web, and with each other. The political claims for the world of digitalisation have demonstrated that there is and has been an incorrect understanding of the difference between the analogue and the digital and provides evidence as to how we persist with the same principles that realise these mis-apprehensions of the world we live in and have made for ourselves. We don't have to think in terms of those dualisms, which are so easily set up between what is quantifiable and what is unquantifiable, but at the same time we do not surrender to the horizontalist dream. For example, I think in many ways the terrain of the digital highlights

for us more than ever how the unquantifiable is necessary to the functioning of systems. One of the things you were mentioning in relation to systems and site was the work set in Vegas, *We Never Close*, and certainly this work looked to these issues.

**PS:** Yes, of course, just to reiterate, it was the work *We Never Close*, which you exhibited as part of the inaugural Middlesbrough Art Weekender I co-founded in 2017. I found the video fascinating, especially its use of sound. I spent the whole weekend just sitting in that space, and every fifteen minutes being confronted with the ‘noise’ of the soundtrack. The repetitiveness of listening and experiencing one work in a very intense way made me think more about this question of mobility in the way the camera, subtitled text, and sound all moved around an oscillated point in the work; this could be what you referred to earlier in *Covenant Transport Move or Die* as the gravity (camera or central axis). Reading the essay “We Never Close” that you wrote at the same time (a kind of parallel to the work), I was considering the speed at which the camera moves. The video really considered the way the image transverses the angles of the buildings. I began to think of Vegas as a site for image production, and as a hot-spot example for theorising about consumption. It seems that the video work is talking about it and visually showing it but still not really referencing it... Like it’s so there... but it’s not there!

**AB:** What you’re saying is something that I’ve often referred to when I have spoken about other pieces that I’ve made, so it’s a very resonant comment. I guess what you’re making me think about is how, in a lot of my work, I spend a lot of time shooting in different locations, travelling, and researching spaces, but I never want the work to be a portrait of *that* space. I mean this in the sense that I don’t go to a space/location and find out something that happened there and then tell a story as if I’m doing some archaeology on a place or some kind of sociological research. The work, I guess, tries to use site as a simple prop to speak to an argument that I have. I’m just thinking of the TV series *M\*A\*S\*H*, which was shot relatively close to where I live, near Paramount Ranch, and, of course, *M\*A\*S\*H* was not set in LA... We all know that the images we see in film, in cinema, aren’t truthful on an empirical level, but at the same time this has no bearing upon whether the film is good or not or whether we invest in the movie. Knowing that *M\*A\*S\*H* was shot in LA doesn’t mean that I am unable to watch things like *M\*A\*S\*H* anymore; my knowledge that it is not empirically real has no bearing upon my commitment to it as a set of ideas—a world! So, we can

think of location having no bearing upon the condition of the work. I like that, I like playing or working through these conditions of saying, well, OK, I’ll make the effort to shoot in this location, but at the same time, there is a non-relation between the site and the work, so it was a kind of intrinsic cut.

**PS:** So, we are differentiating between the location of shoot and the creation of a shot? Is it in some way a definition between seeing what the tool of the camera can capture rather than seeing a depiction of a location? It makes me think of some smartphone cameras, where the lenses are quite poor but how they collect noise rather than necessarily formulated and recognisable figure-images. The camera takes a poor-quality image, then the device, using its audio facility to record sound and through images databases, develops the image you see on your device. These become an image that is a representation of what an image of your subject could look like. So, the idea of a single lens reflex on a camera, on an analogue camera or on a DSLR, no longer applies to any accurate depiction of the thing that we encounter in the physical world. It’s not a factual copy of the thing you are seeing. Instead, the algorithm produces an image of the sound the camera is hearing.

Bringing it back to the work, are there layers in *We Never Close* where the real place (Las Vegas), is visually there, but is the video creating a ‘non-place’ at the same time? What the work was making me think of when considering both the sound and narrative running throughout, was the terrains and systems of capital. I was then able to access the context of discussing this kind of mobility of the camera and consumption as possible ways in which we navigate capitalist markets and systems, without being distracted by the spectacle of Las Vegas.

**AB:** One of the reasons I wanted to tackle the subject of Las Vegas was precisely because of the traditional representations of Vegas that are given to us, as you say, whether they’re in an essay or in an artwork or in a movie, or even in Las Vegas’s self-promotional marketisation. It could be said that the stable meanings that we have around Las Vegas, all the traditional ways of reading it, enable Las Vegas to act as the example *par excellence* of the crude reality of capital. The truth of capital is here in front of us, exposed for all to see unapologetically. It’s often asserted as the true moment where capital reveals itself in this kind of Brechtian formation of saying, “I am a construct as and of capital, and here I am in all my ugliness,” but this assertion very quickly becomes a moral category. This way of looking



at Vegas was a very typical reading in critical literature of Vegas as a site, and this is shared by the promotional material that Las Vegas had constructed *about itself*. This is seen in our general cultural love affair with promoting the life or being of Las Vegas as a real contradiction, and contradiction becomes a one-dimensional figure as identity, where the established moral opponents of marriage and prostitution, fun and violence all unite as part of one holistic space. Both Vegas and its analysts would say it's a place we love to hate, and its redemption is its honesty! To that extent, Vegas could be seen to situated as the real, a kind of 'non-place' or a kind of 'other place', as Foucault's work might address it via his work on heterotopias. However, again, my motivation here as part of the work was to critique these correlations between the local and empirical lived experience and the claims to the real condition of universal systems. My task then was to see the video as a site of investigation that would not reignite the myths ironically or naively.

Whereas other cities hide the truth of capital, Vegas is explicating it all the time, no holds barred. I found that moral approach to critiquing Vegas (by correlating it to the real of capital) to be pretty suspect and also limited because it simply produces the real as a mirror of the conditions of its aesthetic manifestation. This procedure takes the form of a deductive process rather than seeking to undergo a more thorough analysis of the non-relation between the city as a construct and the real. I must say it's a charismatic and engaging argument to say that cities like Vegas and Dubai hold the truth of capital in their grotesqueness, but central to this statement is a valorisation of these urban spaces as capitalistic in form and structure. Their providing an axis for critique is not enough to redeem them. This critique, as I have said, is characterised by morality. I just don't think that the logic for critique in this case is good enough, and it doesn't make any sense because it disables anything that could move past this aesthetic—it preserves the status quo. In other words, saying that Vegas is the truth of capital does not allow us to see any way in which we can live with capital more productively, which is surely a thing we need to think about in these times. To that extent, critique itself performs another mythology, and I guess the work wanted to tackle the idealisation of Las Vegas as a site of thought, as a site of a theory of capital, but also to disavow that and say, “no.”

**PS:** Morality is such a valuable word when thinking through this work, and I would agree that seeing Vegas as a truth of capital would be the incorrect approach.

It could be that the productive process would be to take what you have said about Vegas as a site of thought and begin with the productive refuting of forms of consumption we have discussed throughout in regard to mobility.

**AB:** In response to your commentary on mobility, we could say that the exact problem with this critique is that it overdetermines things to thoughts in such a way that things cannot move. The very aesthetic that has configured this immobility is the dynamic aesthetics of the transcendental subject, defined by capital, the one who can go anywhere in the standard definitions of libertarianism. The camera work and sound in *We Never Close* has force, but it also drags in the world; the sound is developed from scratch music, and the piece is invested in the aesthetics of materialism. The text literally talks about this, the material expression of capitalist fictionalisation in places, sites, and ecologies of experience. The desert therefore becomes no escape but another version of the slot machines that people tether themselves to.

**PS:** That is a strong message to think through, how, if mobility is critiqued to the point of stillness, would this determination on movement mean that it creates a stale repetition of the current climate, maybe it is something through the axis you discuss – it is a pivot to forge a different or more ad-hoc movement?

When I think—it's completely anecdotal and probably a bit silly—but when I think of Vegas at this minute, it makes me think of the children's film *Despicable Me*. So, when the main villain says, “Oh, and we stole the Eiffel Tower, the miniature version from Las Vegas...” or like, “Oh we stole the pyramids, the miniature version from Las Vegas...”—this kind of mythology of capitalism to produce sites that replicate the existence of the world. This is where we go to consume the world in representation, and we're transparent about it. It doesn't happen elsewhere—there's probably more in common between Vegas and Canary Wharf than there is between Vegas and a casino. Like it's those kinds of places of consumption, but necessarily places where roles are played. Vegas might be a parody, or more a tragedy; it depends on which way you want to look at it.

**AB:** I think so, too, and we could say that my interpretation is a particular reading of Vegas as defined at a particular time in history. The story that the video engages with is the reconfiguration of LV from when it was operating in the family-style entertainment

business of appropriation and the miniaturisation of the monumental, to another kind of Vegas, one that is more ‘contemporary’. In the last twenty years, Vegas was no longer concerned with the conspicuous production of consumerist family-oriented fantasy, and instead it wanted to redefine itself as being exclusive and luxurious, a place for secret indulgences that were respectable, low-key, and cool. In the video, a part of the text that flashes up on screen directly talks about this idea, where Steve Wynn went from making *Pirates of the Caribbean* experiences at the front of the Treasure Island hotel to making the Wynn hotels, the ‘classy’ joints, where the fountains and the Ferrari dealership were out back, away from the spectacle of the wandering consumer. This story is quite a literal depiction of what happened to the architecture of Las Vegas as at one point in the ‘80s and ‘90s; the entertainment experience of consumption was public and shared and then in the early 2000s, you’ve got a shift in architectural design to this new exclusive market where things are hidden, and you’ve got to have a membership to get into it. Remarkably, Vegas managed to be more flexible than the very theories that had defined it. As a kind of critique of capital. I was interested in how the site was more flexible than the critical imagination. So, the site had more mobility than our thought.

**PS:** What it’s making me think of is that text by Dr Bridget Crone in her section “Seeing Red” in your book *Final Machine* (Urbanomic 2013), and I quote: “We begin with violence, Red Yellow Green, but they’re just circles, Red, Yellow, Green... the colour throbs.” But when you’re talking about all these places and these kinds of changes, or movements, similarly with Red Yellow Green, are they becoming signifiers of certain things? This is also making me think of Brian Massumi’s work on movement and sensation in terms of affectual bodies. What I am getting at is a question of what is the subject in question? Is it the experience of the subject matter of the work proposed to the viewer, or is the viewer meant to feel the throbbing and to gather a deeper understanding of how place can be distorted and constructed?

**AB:** Bridget Crone’s work offers a great account of affect theory and its connection to art practice and curation. It’s one of the reasons why I thought it would be interesting to have Bridget in that work. I love working with Bridget, and one of the reasons is because we don’t share the same discourses so it’s great to see what happens when someone comes to the work with a different vocabulary...

**PS:** I am thinking about how the different forms of experience that we have talked about are brought together to generate Vegas as a visceral space in this work.

**AB:** Well, the idea of how we experience and think “space” is pretty central to this question. First, there is the argument or theory that thought cannot match the velocity of change that we actually engineer in the world or that is present to the world in its being before us. We’re out of touch with ourselves and the world in that way, insofar as everything becomes a kind of heteronomous nature, which could be quite surreal, since objects recede from our cognitive grasp. In many ways, Las Vegas demonstrated for me the paucity of thought on the Left when it made claims like this. My critique of this approach to materiality and sense experience means that thought is adequate to the task of critique. So, what the work, I guess, is proposing is that we can think of critique as a constructive action. I’m pretty optimistic that we can engineer something with thought that is different to the errors that I have focussed on in my work and that provide some of its content. Indeed, as I pointed out earlier, my work often tries to deal with and include these problems as a condition of where critique comes from, so that these problems aren’t ignored but are taken as part of a critical inheritance, a set of habits, givens, and norms that we have to navigate and work past. The works are not just stories of failed and poor ideas, and certainly these failures are powerful stories and have distinct charismatic appeal! Instead, I really hope that the work sets up new possible approaches to making and thinking that whilst including these problems also becomes something else and offers something else. A fear of constructing forms has often blighted the Left, along with a fear of representation and reason, as if they are all bundled together to produce inevitable forms of evil. We see this as narratives from negative dialectics and post-structuralism; but engineering with a sense of commitment does not mean that we’ve produced a monster or a form of thought that we cannot be responsible for. The fear that I am talking about is like a kind of Adornian nightmare, a theory from the Dialectic of Enlightenment where reason authors forms of horror that delimit and signify the limits of our consciousness and our intelligence. That’s the kind of classic sci-fi horror-story narrative. But I’m saying that it’s not actually true or logical. We might be out of step or not have found the modes of explication and explanation and understanding to narrate or comprehend what we’ve actually made in the world, but it doesn’t mean

we can't do it, not abide by the commitments that take us to new places.

As an example, we could talk about the complexities of self-producing algorithmic systems that seem to be divorced from the human once they are at work. Does that mean that we want to label them as modes of horror that spell the end of humankind? Well, no, that's a nice sci-fi horror story, and it might be a fun movie to watch or whatever, but in fact it's a misunderstanding of the role of these computational systems. Giving them an identity in relation to a conception of ourselves only serves to restrict our understanding towards the question of what and who we are, not what reality is as a structure and how we produce it. The idea of giving inanimate objects human qualities, or even alien qualities that are established against the human, still relies on having some kind of causal relation that is actually a myth. Destroying this myth is crucial. It might mean that we lose out on particular stories of jeopardy and drama, but perhaps it will produce other stories that narrate the world and make it.

**PS:** I think that's a really interesting point to consider a position to describe how algorithms become self-sufficient or produce new systems independently. I've never thought of a positive attitude to this process in any way. This notion of locating a series of possibilities that could happen as a result of a base programming of sets of instructions describes something similar to what we just discussed. We were just talking about how the digital in its ubiquity can be seen as something that is autonomous, and then we also talked about how our own intelligence can produce things in the world that seem to be free from us, or even refuse the understanding of them. These questions of lives that are non-related to the human or can be beyond our mastery do inscribe a kind of fear in us. But here we are talking about how this kind of AI as self-sufficient, alongside us, or with us, or against us, is not necessarily negative.

**AB:** Maybe a kind of analogy would be the way we talk about ideology. I mean, we can say that humans construct ideology, belief systems, and the very idea of terming them as ideological means that we've taken them as nature and as apparently independent notions that guide us—and we know it! For example, we could say theology and ethics act like this. A theological ethic such as “Thou Shalt not Kill” would be an independent autonomous directive that apparently comes from the outside. It exists independently of us, but nevertheless we can think that in other formats like the political and

the theological; we have examples of this idea of something that is not from us but is for us and is only manifest because we act upon it and inscribe it in action.

So, maybe we're quite used to that idea of producing “the outside”, and it has a necessary role in life and the social. And what I'm saying in respect to this digital question in particular, with its apparent formation of a ubiquitous “non-place” is that we can ask how we can navigate this space intelligently. We might call such spaces “spaces of the negative”, or the space of what is yet to be known. Key to this is to make constructive distinctions between the pragmatic and necessary grounds that we need to conduct this study from against the mythic grounds that would render us stationary. Unlike a theology, this space is yet to be known.

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**Amanda Beech** Amanda Beech is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. Drawing from popular culture, critical philosophy, and real events, her work manifests in different media including critical writing, video installation, drawing, print, and sculpture. Using a range of compelling rhetorical and often dogmatic narratives and texts, Beech's work poses questions and propositions for what a new realist art can be in today's culture: that is, a work that can articulate a comprehension of reality without the terminal mirror of a human identity. Beech has shown her artwork and presented her writing at major international venues including most recently a new web commission *This Time* for the Remai Modern Museum, Canada (2017) and *Covenant Transport Move or Die* at The Baltic Center for Contemporary Art (2016-17). Other recent work includes her contributions to *Neocentric*, at Charim Gallery, Vienna, Austria (2016); *Bots, Bodies and Beasts*, at Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2016); *What Hope Looks Like After Hope*, Home Works Forum 7, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, Lebanon (2015); *Speculative Aesthetics*, Tate Britain, London, UK (2015); and the presentation of the three-channel video installation *Final Machine* at both *Agitationism* at the Irish Biennial (2014) and *L'Avenir*, Montreal Biennale (2014). Beech's published writing includes essays for the anthologies *Speculative Aesthetics*, Urbanomic (2014); *Realism, Materialism, Art*, Sternberg Press (2015); and contributions for the Irish and the Montreal Biennales' catalogues. Her artist's books include *First Machine*, *Final Machine*, LPG (2015); *Final Machine*,

Urbanomic (2013); and *Sanity Assassin*, Urbanomic (2010). Beech is Dean of Critical Studies at CalArts, California, USA.

**Paul Stewart** is an artist and curator based in Gateshead, England. He is a lecturer and course leader BA Fine Art at MIMA School and Art and Design, Teesside University. Completed a PhD (2018) titled: *The Alternative Art School: Art, Hegemony and Critical Pedagogy*. MA in Art & Politics from Goldsmiths College (2012), BA in Fine Art at University of Lincoln (2011). He was the co-founder of the Middlesbrough Art Weekender, Bad Spirits, and the Alternative Art College. He has exhibited work and published around topics sitting at the intersection between art practice, the digital, politics, and critical pedagogy.

# Imagine Universal Basic Income

## Manuel Roßner

Asking what defines a space now leads to different answer than it did ten or twenty years ago. Technology spread the means to create and experience content that holds characteristics which were tied to physical space before. Computer-generated imagery is now indistinguishable from photography, and VR headsets offer a spatial experience which lets you forget that you are not actually in the space that you are seeing. At the same time, the production process of the fancy museum buildings where we do exhibitions and many of the artworks themselves originate from the very same software that is being used to create digital content. My assumption is: physical space has a status quo because our bodies are part of this reality, but this is about to be disrupted by immersive experiences as well as artificial intelligence.

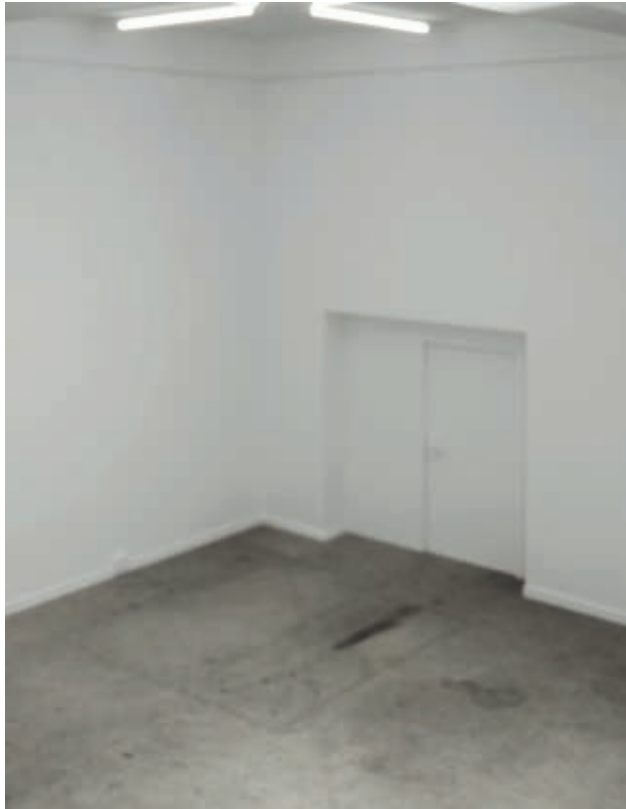
On the previous pages, you can see an algorithm discovering the borders of an invisible container, which is actually the space in the background on a smaller scale. Just like AI at the moment, this algorithm is not conscious, but it develops a certain understanding of its surroundings. While the capabilities of such agents develop at high speed, our own status quo is questioned. How will those programs develop, and which human activities will they take over?

For the larger parts of society, these questions are unsettling. While the democratization of information and the reduction of production costs that came with the technological developments provide new opportunities for artists, I do not believe that they create alternatives to neoliberalism. I rather see it as an acceleration in the very same logic. A more promising idea to escape from the rising inequalities of the current system is a Universal Basic Income.

[www.float.gallery](http://www.float.gallery)  
[www.manuelrossner.de](http://www.manuelrossner.de)  
[www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com](http://www.imagine-universal-basic-income.com)

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**Manuel Roßner** creates spaces, often, but not necessarily, intersecting with reality. In 2012, he started Float Gallery, where the classical white cube is extended to the digital realm. He's part of Internet TBD, an attempt to map topics related to the hangover of the Internet. He is represented by Roehrs & Boetsch, Zurich.





# Reliable Communications

## An Interview between Philip Howe and Yuri Pattison

My first *IRL* encounter with Yuri Pattison's work was in the exhibition *The Future of Memory* at Kunsthalle Wien in the spring of 2015. Sited inconspicuously at the rear corner of the space was a desktop computer, replete with a spinning office chair and a large and seemingly abstract print above—I would later discover that this was an inversion of the “Pale Blue Dot” photograph taken by the Voyager space probe as it lost communication with earth.

The artwork in question was Pattison's *RELIable COMMunications*, an online-based work in which disparate fragments of networked communications emerged and sank away as I surfed over the work. Ever present was a spinning digital maquette of a chunk of the Chelyabinsk meteor. Other images and textual references would flow by in a way reminiscent of the earliest manifestations of the Internet, presented here in an almost painterly assemblage of surreal animation. *RELIable COMMunications* tells two stories of major political events happening in a networked environment—the face of the 1991 Soviet coup and the tragedy of Chelsea Manning's communications with hacker-turned-informant Adrian Lamo, who following the conversation would reveal her plans to the FBI, leading to her brutal incarceration at the hands of the US government.

I would follow Pattison's practice closely up to and beyond a studio visit in 2016. It was in this visit that I could first figure the myriad contexts this work invoked and wove together, the rigorous research and critical engagement behind his effortlessly presented physical and ethereal works. This interview was conducted some time after in 2017, notably before the winter that Bitcoin smashed into the popular consciousness.\*

**Philip Howe:** I want to start by discussing the piece *RELIable COMMunications* and explore the significance of juxtaposing two seemingly disparate, but undeniably significant events. They both share real and tangible consequences, but the actual substance of them was played on the virtual plane. In what sense do you feel that this piece is extrapolating forms of para-community that have developed in online contexts?

**Yuri Pattison:** *RELIable COMMunications* was very much about indirectly reanimating an archive of chat logs I found relating to the failed Soviet coup of 1991 (that source material is here); when effectively reposting this material back online, I wanted to draw upon the subjective connections made when I was dealing with this content and present those connections as layers and hyperlinks.

I wanted the work, and this material, to exist in its new form within the present; thus, the events surrounding the, at the time, recent Chelyabinsk meteor incident seemed to fit. In particular, the work drew from the online cottage industry of meteorite collectors using the same network infrastructure as the coup chat log participants to sell apparent fragments from the event on eBay. Reconstructing and extracting the 3D form of those meteorite fragments from the eBay images posted by those sellers became a tangential activity analogous to reconstructing the live flow of information from the coup.

When collecting these images, the authenticity of these many fragments often seemed doubtful, and again I viewed them as analogous to fragments of information gleaned when events of great social upheaval are still in play.

I made the work with the backdrop of the Arab Spring in the news, a series of events touted by the media as being the first major instances of the political influence of networked technology, and I wanted to perhaps point to the seeds of something before and beyond this as a way to understand the underlying human potential in these networks.

The work also makes slight references to its own context—for instance, I chose to host it with Bahnhof in Sweden, a company that has hosted data for political provocateurs such as Wikileaks and the Pirate Bay, and this laid the path to the video work *colocation, time displacement* being made at their central Stockholm facility. Other elements of the work have continued to shift and change, such as external website elements



which were embedded using iframes—so as those websites are updated, the work shifts and changes outside of my control; this is an approach I have brought forward into works displayed in physical exhibitions.

**PH:** What has struck me about your object-making, in the physical and virtual sense, is this kind of invisibility and immateriality employed to realise them. I feel they could be described as non-objects, as paraphysical, they seem to bleed two ways between worlds—this was strongly manifest in your residency and exhibition with the Chisenhale Gallery, *user, space*. What are you aiming to address and share with the audience in these pieces?

**YP:** My original focus during the Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency was to explore the rather abstract idea of “London Tech City,” a UK government scheme to stimulate technology investment in East London after the 2012 Olympics. This seemed like a logical gateway to deal with the wider ecology relating to networked technology and wider societal changes in how people live and work.

During the residency, I relocated my practice to a series of related new workspaces, from grassroots peer-to-peer hackerspaces to corporate spaces all the way up to exclusive membership based co-working environments more akin to members’ clubs.

How I related to these spaces differed; with the institutional weight of the gallery behind the project, we contacted number of ‘case study’ locations and invited them to participate in the residency by hosting an artwork made for the space and also often a related event. These works were a series of networked sculptures, most in the form of lobby artworks, and their creation and maintenance allowed me ongoing and honest access and engagement with the spaces and the people working there.

These works, their documentation in the spaces, my experiences, and the outcome of the events formed the basis for my position of the show. The works were brought back to the gallery and reformatted and reframed in a speculative space imagining the gallery as a co-working space in a form of unclear transition (either about to open, or shutting down). The materials, references, and display strategies used were all informed by extrapolating design strategies I had encountered in the real spaces.

The show took on more abstract concepts, such as the influence of computer network architecture and user hierarchy permissions within physical spaces and organisation of communities, and attempts to codify and represent these nuanced ideas through other forms of invisible control—elements like the automated lighting and access to daylight, sound being conditioned with white and grey noise, and elements like caffeine being vaporised into the exhibition atmosphere. These rather unseen elements were designed as a support structure for the more visible austere sculptural and architectural structures within the space.

**PH:** Co-working and delocalised collaboration play a crucial role in your practice, for example, in the piece *1014*, in which you present a sort of video tour of the Hong Kong hotel room where Edward Snowden sought refuge during the release of his NSA leaks. What was the process in realising this particular piece? How does this dislocated production enhance or alter the output?

**YP:** *1014* was produced without me ever setting foot in that hotel room, or even travelling to Hong Kong.

When the Snowden event originally occurred, I found and noted a discussion on a hotelier forum where a number of concierges were speculating on the hotel and then the room number he might be staying in; one participant in the discussion posted that they had contacted the hotel in question, The Mira, and confirmed the room number with a staff member through simple social engineering by claiming to be a representative of *The Guardian* who wanted to extend Snowden’s stay. Once Snowden had fled Hong Kong, they followed up and posted the room number. This fact, and how it was extracted through the most traditional form of hacking, stuck with me.

I ended up sitting on this information until the resources to shape it into something emerged—eventually this ended up being a small Arts Council-funded grant meant for the production of a modest “online” work—and not a video work involving a location-based shoot. Finding someone local to shoot the video for me, rather than wasting funds on airfare, was in part a practical consideration, but it also seemed to fit the wider thematic perfectly.

Through social media, I found a professional videographer (unnamed, as he wished to remain uncredited), actually through many degrees of separation, residing

in Hong Kong who was willing to take on the job. The proposal seemed to resonate with him, and the shoot was enthusiastically planned from a shot list I drew together plus references such as my previous video works, equipment, and lenses.

We set a rough time slot for the shoot, and I attempted to book the room, 1014, in which Snowden had resided. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this specific booking request was met with a lot of suspicion by hotel staff—in the end, I had to resort to using a new identity to book the room, and by claiming the number 1014 held an importance to me due to numerical superstitious beliefs, I was successful in securing the location.

The actual shoot was directed via Telegram, an encrypted messaging app actually recommended by Snowden, as suggested by my Hong Kong contact (he requested to be paid in Bitcoin)—so the content for the work was made within and via these various networks. This strategy was a further development of similar techniques I had used up to that point in smaller ways within the production of works, mostly exploring and expanding the idea of working closely with others through networked communication—and it embraces a loss of control over the aesthetics to allow for an unparalleled level of immediacy and the direct access these techniques provide.

This work was produced after Laura Poitras' Oscar win for *Citizenfour* and the news of Oliver Stone beginning production on the Snowden story, and I was very much considering the mediatisation of this historic event, very much still in play, without any sight of meaningful change. So, I was also aware that the techniques being utilised were also akin to how a remote “second unit” would work in film production.

**PH:** A piece that has fascinated me is *The Ideal*. It's an awry look into the bloated and obscure industrial practice of Bitcoin mining in China and in a canny way brings forth a lot of dynamics at play in late-capitalist Sino-Western social, economic, and political relations. What attracted you to this context? This appears to be the most challenging work you have realised in this co-work schema, but also it required a great deal of trust between you and your contact. How much of this was reflected in your experience of making the work?

**YP:** Actually, this piece also originated from postings on a bulletin board forum, however much more directly. I had been monitoring this board for a number of years due the many fringe theories and discussions often

given credence by the community (for example, a theory that Bitcoin could be vulnerable to hacking by someone with telepathy), but for a long time Bitcoin seemed like too abstract and inhuman a topic to successfully explore through a work.

That all changed when I came across a thread posted by someone identifying as Eric Mu, Chief Marketing Officer of the small Beijing-based Bitcoin startup HaoBTC. Eric was posting long-form diary entries about his relocation to a remote region of China just outside the city of Kangding to build a new Bitcoin mining operation, effectively a hyper-specialised data centre taking advantage of the almost free hydroelectric power from the neighbouring dam.

His posts seemed to be an opaque mixture of posting from personal determination and the very current online economy of using emotive personal experiences as a marketing tool to legitimise a company, product, or service (his job was to market HaoBTC). What stuck out for me was his often candid and critical discussion of the Chinese government's presence in the contested region, which underscored to me a possible wider alternative political outlook in those attracted to technologies like Bitcoin—and this peaked my interest in making a work in this space.

I contacted Eric via email and explained my interest in starting a conversation with a view to somehow making a work with his help. He explained his attraction to Bitcoin was because it was the forefront of radical technological change, and his writing output was influenced by his American English teacher at university who had introduced him to embedded writing techniques. He agreed to help me make the work under the guise of it being an extension of this vague 'organic' style of marketing he was producing for the company.

Around the same time, a number of threads on the same Bitcoin forum began appearing, questioning the reality of the HaoBTC operation and building complex conspiracy theories that Eric Mu was an invented identity.

Eric had agreed to help me film; it emerged he had a fairly high specification camera and stabiliser gimbal with him, and after I sent him links to previous video works (*1014* and *colocation, time displacement*) we agreed it would make sense for me to send him Bitcoin for the purchase of a wide-angle lens and a drone to augment this kit (this was in addition to a fee agreed to

cover his time). I used the majority of the funds given to me for the production of a work for the British Art Show and transferred these to Eric's Bitcoin wallet—and then waited.

Over a number of weeks, Eric began sending me first-person POV explorations of the facility, living quarters, and the day-to-day physical work in constructing this digital currency production centre. We traded observations, questions, and ideas around the representation of the facility but also ideas around currency and its longer history—and some of these experiences and references were codified into the physical sculptural elements I used to house the video works.

The preview clips Eric was sending me were of lower resolution, and on his return to Beijing he physically sent me SD cards of the raw full-resolution footage—this needed to be mailed due to the “Great Chinese Firewall” preventing us from exchanging large files. I requested Eric mail me stones he had collected from the riverbed below the dam as a way to make visible this physical exchange within the sculptural works.

The final video work is a combination of footage Eric Mu shot for me and my own footage exploring microscopic views of Bitcoin mining computer circuit boards, and presents this in a sculptural form incorporating an active water-cooled Bitcoin mining rig—producing currency on the same network as referenced in the video.

Ultimately, although this work is about the apparently invisible and intangible Bitcoin technology, it more closely looks at a wider story of the accelerated complex physical developments, often not for the best, happening though advancements in networked technology and the very human stories that happen within this.

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**Philip Howe** is a London-based artworker, curator, producer, and writer whose research and practice focus on the intersections of contemporary art and radical politics. Having graduated with an MA in Art & Politics at Goldsmiths College in 2013, with a particular focus on anarchism, conflict, and emerging technologies, Philip now produces expansive projects and exhibitions with a/political, a non-profit organisation dedicated to collaborations with socio-political artists that tour institutions globally.

**Yuri Pattison** is a tireless, natural thinker at the forefront of a group of emerging artists/intellectuals whose practices, in an inherently 21<sup>st</sup>-century manner, are informed by a seamless merger of hard and soft realities. He works in sculpture and digital media, exploring the visual culture of digital economies and the natures of online/offline skill sharing. Typical, recent examples of his artworks thoughtfully list medium and/or displayed interior contents, as if listed by border security agents: “custom made perspex 1U format box, server PSU & switch, server case fans, AI: The Tumultuous History of the Search for Artificial Intelligence, by Daniel Crevier (book), PDLC switchable privacy film, cables, generic unpainted architectural 1:100 scale model figures, dust, sebum [an oily secretion of the sebaceous glands], digital timers, travel power adapter...”

In October 2017, mother's tankstation opened its London gallery with *context, collapse*, a second solo exhibition by Yuri Pattison. The artist's first solo exhibition with mother's tankstation, *sunset provision*, opened in November 2016. Pattison's recent solo exhibitions include *Trusted Traveller*, Kunsthalle Sankt Gallen, Switzerland, and *citizens of nowhere*, Kevin Space, Vienna, Austria (both 2017). He was one of four artists commissioned to make new work for the inaugural exhibition at ICA Miami, in December 2017. Earlier in 2017, an indicative installation was acquired by the Irish Museum of Modern Art. Yuri Pattison also holds considerable UK curatorial updraft, with a major work, *the ideal (v. 0.1)*, presented as part of British Art Show 8, 2015-2017, and he was the recipient of the 2016 Frieze Artist Award, culminating in a major new commission, *Insights (crisis trolley)*. The Tate Britain exhibition, *The Weight of Data*, curated by Lizzie Carey Thomas in 2015, also included a breakthrough video sculpture, *colocation, time displacement*. His practice was the focus of the prestigious two-year CREATE residency at Chisenhale Gallery, London, which concluded with a major solo show, *user, space*, curated by Polly Staple in 2016.

# Online Exhibitions: The Curator as Director New Scenario

As the documentary appearance or reproduction of a work of art becomes more and more important due to the increasing possibilities of digital dissemination, there is also a shift towards exhibitions that are developed for online reception. The formerly physical, walkable but locally bound exhibition space becomes the production site, and the formerly general documentation will be developed into a digital, non-walkable<sup>1</sup> but globally accessible exhibition. Thus, if one shifts the location of the exhibition into the digital space in which (at least for the time being) flat pictures are the predominant actors, and turns the physical space into the production site for these pictures, then the production of the exhibition changes in such a way that the artwork has to be staged for the extended view through a camera (or other recording medium).<sup>2</sup> The curator becomes an (image) producer or director who has to conceive and control this view of the artwork to be exhibited in a specific setting and a structure and narration for its digital presentation. The digital exhibition structure can be made far more flexible (and even changeable) than the architecturally defined narration or structure of a physical exhibition space.<sup>3</sup> The curator also influences the setting in which they either choose a certain location, situation, or scenario for the (image) production (*found setting*), or they create a setting in the sense of a stage design (physical and digital) or have it made (*built setting*).<sup>4</sup> The setting and the artworks, as well as particular web solutions or narrative structures, can be the starting point and central focus of the exhibition concept and influence the respective selection, production methods, or means of production.<sup>5</sup> The curator must therefore understand the various modes of action and conditions that the individual production and presentation steps entail, both technically and in terms of content, in order to be able to use them fully and creatively. In the case of an online exhibition, it is therefore important to understand the digital possibilities and modes of action in order to think and act beyond the possibilities of physical exhibition-making.

Due to rapidly changing digital circulation mechanisms, the importance of exhibition documentation has also changed. The significant difference in regard to mere exhibition documentation, however, lies in the conscious shaping and combination of the staging of curated works of art in the chosen setting (*image production*) and the online presentation concept (*web solution*) in terms of the overall curatorial concept of the exhibition. The documentation in this case is more or less identical to the actual exhibition, since here, as with the transfer of a physical spatial exhibition into two-dimensional, distributable images (sharing and circulation), no transformation into another dimension or state of matter has to take place. The exhibition images shown online can circulate directly, but they may be torn out of their exhibition habitat or their narrative structure and thus become mere documents again.<sup>6</sup>

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## Notes

**1** In the case of a VR solution (virtual reality), however, one can speak in a certain sense of it being walkable. In the future, the digital space will be walkable just as much as the physical space.

**2** The digital space can also become a production space, and a digital work of art is always also presented in a certain setting. Furthermore, the question arises as to whether the neutrality of subsequent presentation or documentation steps has to be reproduced in this production stage, or whether it makes more sense to continue the artistic process here, as in all other stages that can be designed.

**3** The coder or web designer thus becomes an exhibition technician or architect.

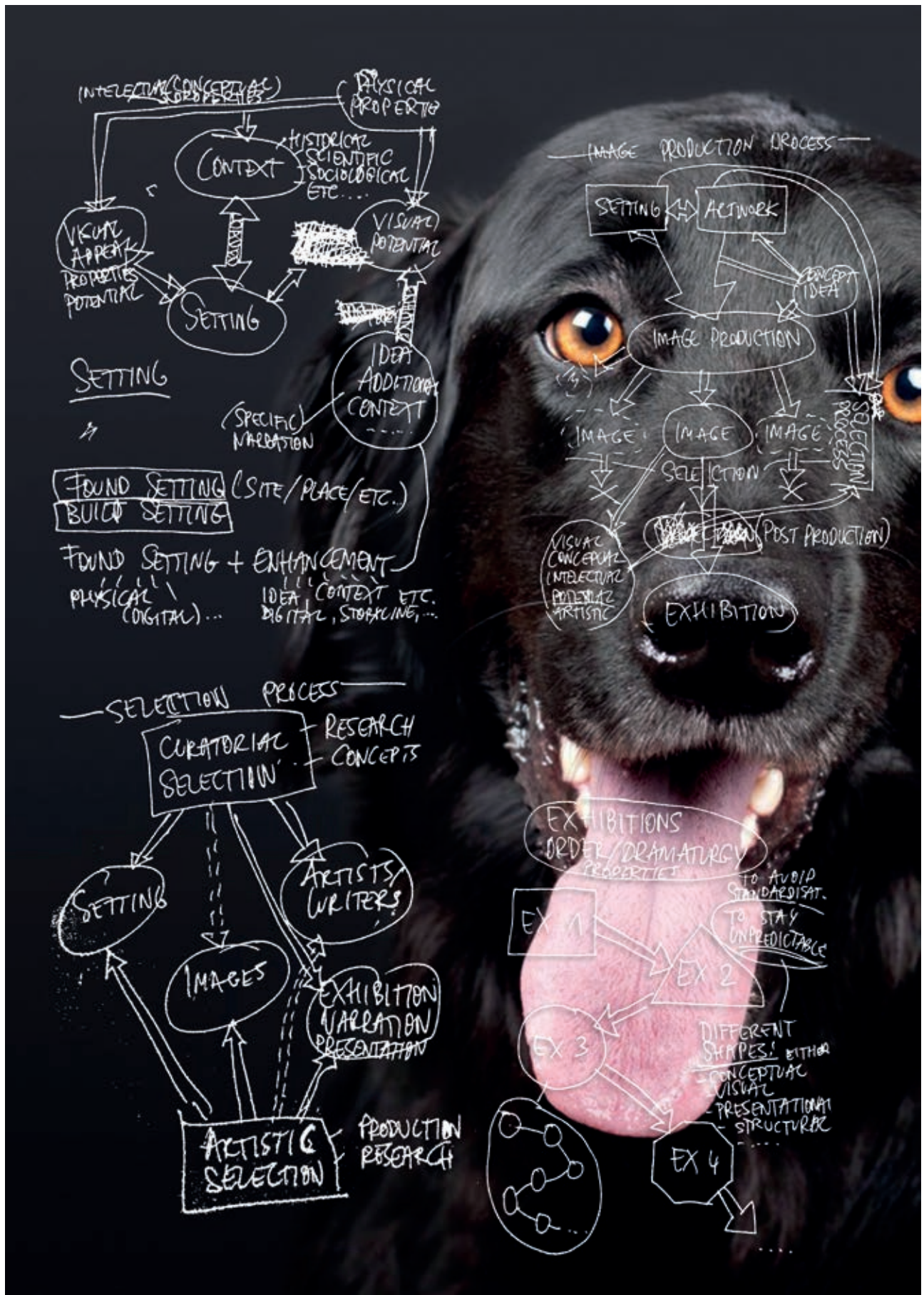
**4** Different, multiple, or changing settings can also be used for production and presentation, as long as they are part of the overall exhibition concept.

**5** In the case of New Scenario, specially selected settings were for the most part the starting point of the exhibition projects, and these went on to influence various conceptual decisions due to their composition. > <http://newscenario.net>

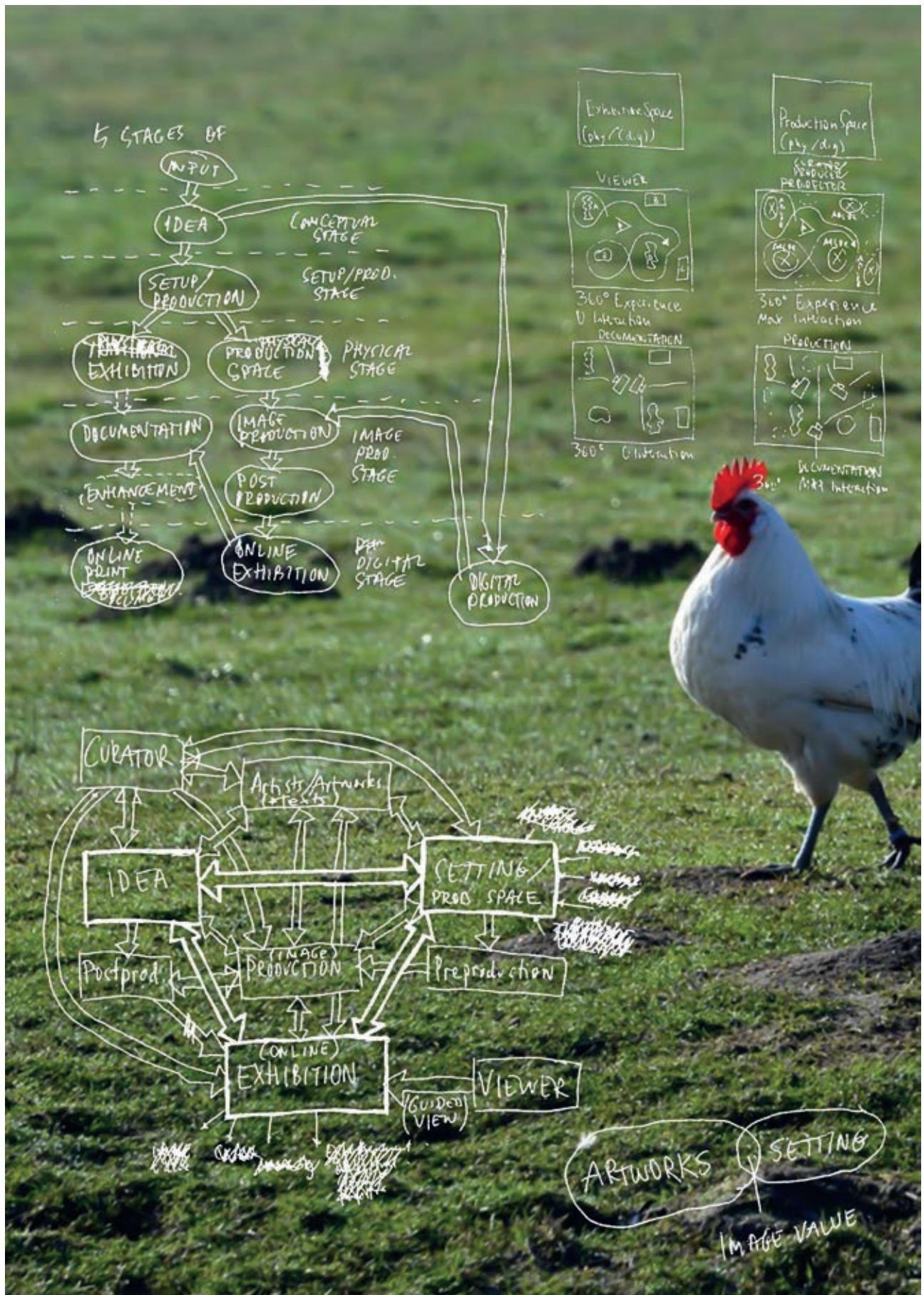
**6** When converting digital exhibition images into a physical two-dimensional printable or three-dimensional presentation version, it is possible to display the surrounding structure, e.g. the browser, i.e. the digital setting, or to display it with the playback device, e.g. the computer in a physical space.

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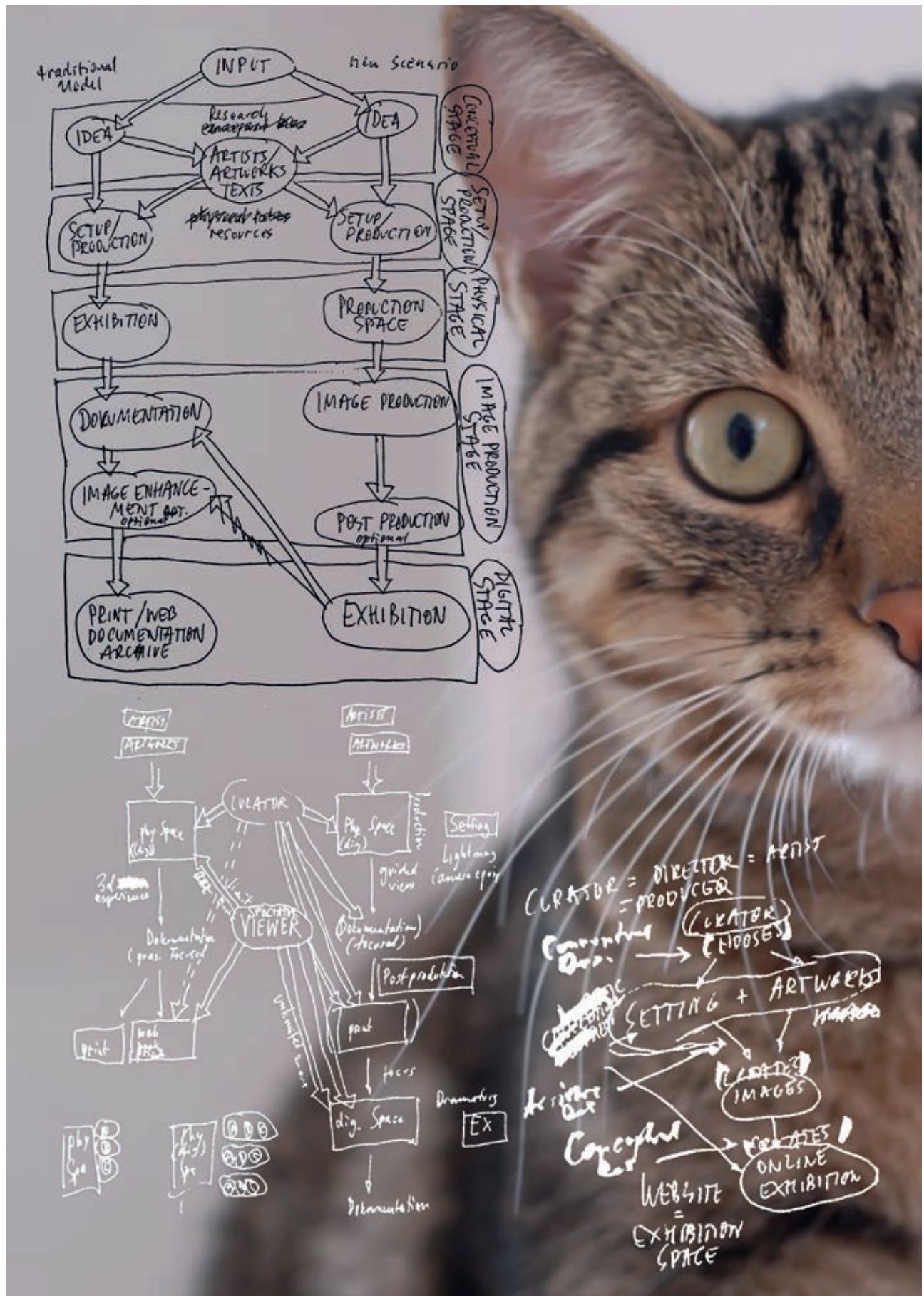
**New Scenario** is a dynamic platform for conceptual, time-based and performative exhibition formats. It happens outside the realm of the white cube and is meant to function as an extension to create new contextual meaning. New Scenario is a project by artists Paul Barsch and Tilman Hornig. *New Scenario Archives* is a loose collection of images, texts, objects, and physical artefacts that are related or connected to New Scenario's exhibition projects and practice. The images/posters were made as illustrations accompanying the self-reflective essay/text "Curator as Director" by Paul Barsch of New Scenario and are based on structural sketches and mind maps.











# A Conversation on Digital Communities, Domestic Space, and Things We Do Online

KA Bird and Paul Stewart

in Conversation with Helen Hester

**Paul Stewart:** In this conversation, we are wanting to pull together a narrative around digital communities through perspectives you've looked at around domestic space and the Xenofeminist Manifesto. The aim is to link social effects of the digital into creative practices. The thematic of the conversation is around digital communities and whether URL (Uniform Resource Locator, colloquially used to represent the web) and IRL (In Real Life) are one and the same in terms of creating and producing works and objects. So, I want to develop with you an idea of—what does community mean in that context?

**Helen Hester:** I am interested in your proposition of how the manifesto translates into artistic practice, but initially I want to pick up on the differentiation between URL and IRL. One of the things that, for me, is a need (within some camps) to consider the issue of IRL as a way to refer to the non-*internet-y* thing. The idea is that you don't create this, at the level of semantics, a division between what is your real life and what is you on the Internet, because all of them are part of the same thing. What I am trying to reinforce is the fact that the digital is material, both in terms of its infrastructure, in terms of the fibre-optic cables that make it happen and the data centres. For instance, Bitcoin is arguably a highly energy-consumptive form of practice rather than something that's immaterial; there is an importance in highlighting the physical acts that are needed to generate digital spaces. The fact is there are bodies both behind the interfaces that we use and in front of them. We are people at all times when we are engaging online; even if we feel more ostensibly cyborg at that point, there's still a level of embodiment that's operational. So, there isn't a URL and an IRL, everything is IRL. I have a tendency to always question the way these categories get formed as strict divisions, because it is murky and quite blurred between what IRL is needed to make URL. If dividing things up means that you can do something at the level of activism or

practice that you couldn't do if they were blurred together, then that's helpful, but you should always be aware that you're making political distinctions when you make categorical differences. Sometimes it's always better to crash these things together than to pry them apart.

**PS:** I completely understand what you are reinforcing—it's only interesting to use semantics if it is politically beneficial. Considering the URL and IRL as blurred, maybe it should all just be IRL, as then it is seeing a web platform or a digital community to still have a physical way of acting or consuming energy in the world. For Laboria Cuboniks, I wonder if the process of writing the manifesto begins in this blurred environment? The form of a manifesto itself is interesting—its manner to be able to be a call to action, a statement of intent.

**KA Bird:** For me, what you are saying is leading towards the act of doing, and in that, Helen, I was hoping you'd make a link with the act of writing the manifesto being itself the act.

**HH:** The manifesto is a very interesting form to use if you're thinking about the way information is received and the way that we engage with things. There is an element for some of us, I think, in terms of gendered expectations to actually engage in an active process of demand-making. It was really interesting, going through that manifesto with seven different perspectives, seven different disciplines, a mixture of Cis women and Trans women, a mixture of women who had children and didn't have children, who had care responsibilities and didn't have care responsibilities. The process of negotiation and wrangling that happened was very interesting to go through, and a kind of microcosmic re-enactment of a lot of wider political struggles around political organising. For instance, how you can say something on behalf of a 'We' that's as diverse as even seven people and to understand the

reality of how difficult that is whilst still insisting upon the necessity of articulating a collective ‘We’ as a political act. It is understanding how important it was to say ‘We’ and to have that as an interpolating gesture as well, because the ‘We’ in the manifesto is not just the six people in Laboria Cuboniks, it’s the people that we’re interpolating into xenofeminism.

**KB:** The political act here being the WE. Still not probably agreeing with everything that was said but still accepting that you’re a collective WE.

**PS:** Yeah, definitely, and I think it’s a brilliant point to go onto that I felt emerged from the manifesto, the point of collectivity. More so, the space to collectively mobilise around, which is very difficult at the moment because there are so many disparate groups and moments that are all existing...

**HH:** That is definitely something that we were thinking about, finding a point for us to move around. It is about the manifesto being a platform rather than a blueprint. How you can create something that can allow other things to propagate whilst being conscious of the danger of talking in terms of platforms? The danger is it just becomes a bit nothing-y... content-less. How can a manifesto be a platform that’s going to allow new things to happen? There’s a lot of content in my new book which is about how you can create possibility for scale in political activism. It is a real struggle because it’s part balancing individuality with replicability or the balance between uniqueness with adaptability. It’s definitely not easy; in the book, I approach it in the end through the idea of the protocol. The idea of the protocol being defined as a relatively broad set of guiding principles that can be taken up to become context-specific points of negotiation in themselves.

**PS:** The protocol is an interesting way of considering points of negotiation; for me, this is similar to what I spoke about in my last book chapter for Sense Publishing (2016), “Art and Commitment: Galleries without Walls,” about a group forming a collective commitment to the involvement of negotiating with each other rather than to the topic itself. It really makes me think about the possibility of developing tools for galvanising a collectivity towards an action. What I think would be interesting in this conversation is to connect these points of action that we have discussed in terms of URL to the process of art production. In my eyes, this has three simultaneous conversations from where we started:

1. As just mentioned, the galvanising of collectives through web platforms that can harbour commitment and protocols for activism.
2. I think there is an important point that we haven’t addressed yet around our own genders or our own sexualities, or our social conditioning that genders our environments, and whether this space for action we are ideologically conceptualising was a space in which objects in an online context can become genderless through this collectivity?

**HH:** Ah, sounds really interesting! I think I’m very curious as to why you are attributing greater potential to the digital than to the non-digital. If you’re looking at the early cyberfeminist work, you sometimes see the sense of, well, when you’re engaging online there is a greater scope for gender fluidity, for self-representation in different ways. Then, of course, that was the ‘90s, and you’re talking about MUDs, chat rooms or forums. Since then, there have been very radical moves away from that towards platforms such as Facebook. These social media contexts have strict ways it expects its users to present themselves; for example, its real-names policy, you can gender yourself any way, but there’s a checklist. Also, there’s been a dramatic shift towards online spaces as spaces of self-presentation. This means it’s anchored, not in this sort of potential for a free-flowing identity, which theorists have always said was extremely limited anyway—what does it matter if you know you can pretend you’re a cat on a forum, when in real life you know you are still very much enmeshed in a body that’s socially readable? There has been a move away from thinking about the online space as being particularly...having a lot of promise for that, which is not to say that the potential for that whole horizon has been shut down. I don’t necessarily think it has, but it’s just interesting that when you’re talking about it in the digital realm, we’ve got the opportunity to think of things differently and I just wonder why, for you, they seem to be so tangible?

**PS:** I think I was connecting it to something you have said before, where “there’s no porn without the cum shot.” So, the idea of the immaterial doesn’t exist because it’s an obsession with the material—an uber material. It is about the space for deviance online, not necessarily through social media platforms, where—you are completely correct—they have become a place in which we present ourselves to the world. But possibly through platforms like Chat Roulette or Chat Random, or these other spaces that allow for different forms of social interaction online. My point is directly

about how we are obsessing about our physical in the digital. I feel, though, that there is still a disconnection between applying what is done online back onto the physical, if that makes sense?

**HH:** Deciphering what you are trying to present, even though you know that the digital is also material and that it's not an immaterial space (it's fundamentally material), you are hinting that it has got its own set of conventions that are particular for that space. Are you suggesting that you adapt to those and you don't necessarily bring them into the world away from the keyboard? If so, I think you know there is a dependency on context. From this position, there are definitely interesting questions about whether those convictions become self-contained in the URL platforms you use. They are miniature micro-projects that have no implications beyond themselves, or whether there is some source of opportunity for generating new logics that are more widely disseminated. For example, Chat Roulette, where you don't know who you're going to speak to and you're perhaps exposed to people that you wouldn't normally 'seek out', there is a development on these platforms through Grindr (or other hook-up/meet-up apps). The development is the categorisation of use; for example, Grindr has the option to choose Masc for Masc and actually closing down the opportunity for multiple interactions. It is closing down the potential for difference very radically. There was a lot of debate about this in the noughties in relation to porn and whether the increasing availability of internet pornography was going to create newer, queerer sexualities because there was a mushrooming of content. What happened was rather the opposite. Obviously, you have this emerging tendency with things such as big porn aggregate websites to absolutely throw themselves into information management processes, so the tagging, coding, indexing of this porn becomes this form of categorising in itself.

**KB:** The categorised areas draw people straight to their desired requests, rather than necessarily seeing a spectrum...

**HH:** Yeah, exactly, i.e., you want "furry foot fetish porn" that's "girl on girl," this narrowing down of content and more specificity. This dissemination and distribution is creating new combinatorial kinds of possibilities. You are also getting this refinement of fetish that's about a closing down of what you get exposed to, so then those moments of a surprise encounter become something that's not really about queer sexuality at all. It's very

often in the form of unpleasant meme surprises! The rick-rolling of porn. This could be in extreme insertions that you weren't expecting, the two girls one cup phenomenon—all of that stuff is about something that's not about an interest in precisely what quote unquote "virtual content" does at the level of the body, because what they are trying to induce is a corporeal paroxysm, but that paroxysm is not always a sexual one. It's not like the shudder of orgasm or the sort of bodily recognition that comes with arousal—it's about disgust, nausea, the gag reflex. The orgasm essentially is a physical, corporeal embodied reaction that is triggered by the virtual content. There's a real interest in how the material has a form of resonance with the body, but I don't necessarily think that scales up into anything which is a political reorientation, or something that has really any traction outside of itself. So, figuring out what sort of digital interventions have traction is quite an interesting process. What would it mean to re-gender an object on the Internet? In terms of—what can you do with that as a political intervention? It might be interesting aesthetically, it might produce really interesting work, but the next question is to ask, why and what is involved in that. Did you have specific objects in mind when you were thinking about that?

**KB:** I was reading a bit about gendered tech. For example, in Tesco (UK supermarket), the self-service machines that have a nice disembodied voice of a woman who tells you that you've got the wrong thing in the bagging area. She's very nice and she's there to help you, and that female voice, specifically female, is also associated with the service industry and caretaking.

**HH:** She's also very stern as well, isn't she? "Unexpected item in the bagging area!" Yeah, there's an element of it where it's like slightly a villainess that you get in Indiana Jones movies. There is a strictness and a coldness that's conveyed in the voice that's very particular to that voice, partly because it is...it's feminized.

**PS:** Also, on the London Underground, the main voice is a female voice, telling you what stop you're going to be at, but as soon as the train or the Tube gets to the end of the line, which you may remember from falling asleep on it, it's a man that goes "ALL CHANGE PLEASE" and then becomes very authoritative like it's the masculine voice that could make people leave the train.

**HH:** I think there's a lot to explore in terms of the behavioural psychology of how people respond to

different kinds of voices and the fact that maybe it's the difference in between the familiar Tube voice and that final stop voice is what makes you notice it. Whilst you've been sleeping on the Tube, that voice that tells you that you're on your way to Seven Sisters or wherever; it's been there in your sort of oneiric landscape and then you need a different one to make you go like, oh! Actually... time to take action now!

**PS:** I think the gendering of objects in a digital space was in reference to sound or navigation, not necessarily static pages or interactions. I think you mentioned a bit about mobility very briefly when you were talking about mobility, to kind of move something forward through a protocol system, which you have discussed in your new book. There is a lot to be done within the way in which we navigate and can hear and sense our surroundings. Particularly in all our contexts online, if we can activate or utilise how that functions, it could really shift the displacements between gender roles in daily life but also how a capital structure forms us to navigate a route in a certain way. I was thinking about it in terms of Mark Fisher, possibly as your term “domestic realism” mirrors his ideas of capitalist realism. Fisher talked about capitalism, using the example of *Children of Men* (film) and the relationship between values. As in the film, there is a scene where the government army is protecting and storing *Guernica* (Picasso) and completely allowing humanity to fall into despair. I'm jumping a bit, but I am trying to get to automation—what will happen after full automation of our labour and post-work? What will happen in that free time, and what things will exist in terms of objects and gender? I just can't comprehend it.

**HH:** Something that has become such a luxury for so many people is seen as being the opposite, because this idea of a work ethic is so tenacious. What do you do if your life doesn't have purpose? To even articulate it in that way is to assume that work is the only thing that can give a life purpose, which is a very interesting perspective to start from. I think full automation is a utopian demand that is obviously never going to happen, as there's like a lot of, first of all, political disincentives, but also there's work that depends upon human interaction. There will be some elements of care work, for example, that will be best done by a human because it's about companionship, and talking, and collective memory. I can't see why AI (Artificial Intelligence) would be bothered with such a parochial, human concern! I think that would still be there; it wouldn't necessarily be transcended. So, I don't think all work will be

obliterated anyway, but if there's a more specific kind of concern about what do we do after work? I think that is a really radical space of opportunity for thinking about what it means to not have a life that's anchored in work, because for a lot of people work itself, the content of work, is not fulfilling at all.

David Graeber talks about the rise of bullshit jobs—people are becoming aware of the fact that their work has no meaning, that what you're doing doesn't count for anything, that nobody would notice if you didn't do your job. My first job was for a local council dealing with domiciliary care in admin which is something where you think... well, that sounds quite meaningful... like you're making sure that care is provided to vulnerable people in their own homes. The role itself was just not enough work to fill the day; that was when I was at my most substantially miserable, I would say. There's a kind of affect that comes from stress, and that's one I face much more in my daily life now; it's this feeling of being overwhelmed, and it corrodes something inside of you—constantly being pumped full of fight-or-flight hormones because you're so busy, but then there's another kind of affect associated with boredom, and that for me was the most soul-destroying. Knowing that nobody would care if I was productive or not, I just had to be there, not contributing.

I've often found that when I talk about post-work, that there's something of a generational disparity. I've noticed that some people who are maybe at a particular point in their career, who have had very enjoyable and personally meaningful work lives will ask, “What's the point of life without work? Work gives you a sense of meaning, work is about human endeavour and drive.” For a lot of younger people, people of my students' age, and of my age as well, there doesn't seem to be quite that same sense because the work they've done has always been inconsequential. There is no need to overcome a resistance to this idea that work is frustrating and immiserating, because it's already there. They are already starting to make a distinction between work in terms of wage labour, or drudgery, and work in terms of meaningful human endeavour; a lot of the time they're finding that sense of meaningful human endeavour elsewhere, but it might not be recognisable to everybody as meaningful. I don't necessarily think that work is any less meaningful because it's not culturally legible. It's more about what possibilities open up when you have autonomy, and at the moment we have no sense of what free time is because everything that we count as free time is recovery from waged work, or domestic

drudgery, and caring responsibilities. Our free time is essentially the recovery... the short recovery periods we have before we have to do something else.

**PS:** I can really see what you mean, and I think all of us can resonate with your experience and real feelings in that particular work role—does it have more to do with what free time is defined as?

**HH:** Yes, completely. But that's because free time doesn't mean time when you're not working. It means work that's autonomous and self-directed.

**KB:** Is there any real motivation to change this landscape?

**HH:** For people who are actually in charge of making it happen?

**KB:** Yes.

**HH:** Not at the moment, I think, and I think if there's going to be change it's going to come from political pressure and demand-making from the working-class, and that has to be happening more and more. I think we are in an interesting moment politically because there is an increased sense of the dissolving of the neoliberal consensus and a move towards alternative opportunities. Obviously, that's also a time of intense risk; as you can see with the rise of Trump and some of the discourse around Brexit here is that, as the consensus breaks down, it could be we could get something much worse arising in its place.

**PS:** What about art practices within the realm of politics?

**HH:** It is for the Left to try and create more emancipatory futures from this moment. There is a new opportunity to try and steer things like domestic design in a different direction, to put things like care work on the agenda in a new way.

In terms of art-making as a point of political organising, work (post-work) is a very useful concept because everybody has a relationship to work. If you're out of work, if you're an unemployed carer, if you're in work, if you're part of the gig economy, if you've got a full-time job, if you're on a pension—everything is defined through your relationship with work. Everybody understands work as a politically and personally important territory. So, it has a certain utility in that sense. But I

also think you know given my interest in domestic realism, I think actually the home and housing are very similar, in terms of the fact that everybody has a relationship to space, to domestic space, to where you live, and to the social relations that take place within that space.

**PS:** I want to bring in Ivan Illich's "Useful Unemployment" discussion in *Tools for Conviviality*. He writes about the idea of useful unemployment as a social tool. To paraphrase, *the institution no longer being the purpose for education, education is the purpose for the institution*, which suggests the position that any university doesn't exist to educate people, education exists so the university can exist and it will profit x, y and z. But what Illich talks about is ownership, re-owning a learning context, re-owning your knowledge transfer, which I think really connects to what we're probably talking about in terms of post-work.

For example, Ahmet Öğüt's Silent University is a really interesting way of distributing knowledge exchange by using the tools of an institution. It is an example I have used many times to restate the point and ability of art practice having a possibility to create ownership for space and particularly education. In a previous article for *OnCurating* (Issue 31), when in conversation with Alistair Hudson, Jeni Fulton and Sam Thorne, Fulton mentioned that Öğüt saw architects as the better activists, where she stated, "*The right to freedom of assembly is, after all, a universal human right, and by circumscribing public space, one automatically infringes on this.*" Maybe this is where the art practice can be seen in this conversation, between politically activating the categories and definitions we are presented by our digital engagements, by private companies and corporate capitalism?

Following this framing, I wanted to ask you how we could, through maybe curatorial practice but also within art practices, infiltrate our institutions. How could you see a way in which we can navigate those spaces?

**HH:** That is an interesting question, and I am unsure how to answer it. On the one hand, I think institutions do some elements of what they are supposed to do very well; for instance, the NHS, when able to function properly in its funding restraints, it does what it needs to do. On the other side, I think it's very difficult to crack them open. What I mean is you've got the space to allow the dissemination of different kinds of knowledge

through this material base, but that is a little aperture of potential freedom that the institution has kind of embedded within it. There's very little scope for coming into a university and creating a radically different form of course, for example, at the moment, because it's all driven by how many students can you recruit, how much research funding can you bring in, you know, it's the financial elements that are attached to the marketisation of universities, which means there isn't the freedom in that.

So, I think a lot of it happens in terms of content, in terms of what you talk to your students about, what they talk to you about, trying to create opportunities for students to pursue knowledge in different ways and doing what you can within the limited framework. But then I think the more interesting endeavours are happening beyond the formal institutions, like the Sex Workers Open University and the Anti-University.

**KB:** So, it's taking the idea of what the university used to mean, and creating within it autonomous spaces?

**HH:** Yes, in terms of self-organised radical learning. It's about creating a more inclusive sense of what art can be and who artists can be. It's about creating a space for different kinds of artistic practice to emerge outside of a kind of production line of people from art schools and institutions. What would it mean to have free time for your artistic practice? Because even the parts where you do get to do what you want, very often it's according to a framework that somebody else has decided for you so it's not truly autonomous activity. So how can art become a more autonomous phenomenon? And I also think there's a really interesting discussion to be had about art's role in articulating current political positions because obviously the manifesto form is getting a lot of attention right now; I sort of wonder about the resurgence of visual propaganda. Propaganda is seen as being the antithesis of art—the visual equivalent of a manifesto. Like xenofeminist propaganda! It's operating according to a very particular sort of visual rhetoric that's very openly politically engaged.

The idea of the visual manifesto is coming from many different political positions, and I think it's so important, because a lot of questions that I know the accelerationists get asked and the xenofeminists get asked is, "Oh how does this relate to art?" And I don't really necessarily think it's our place to tell artists what to do with the ideas, because again it's this idea of creating a platform. But I think it would be interesting to see what a resur-

gence of that sort of aesthetic would look like. It's been a very long time since that's been on the agenda in any way. Like you know, what would it mean, what would it look like now? It is a microcosm of the very close relationship between politics and aesthetics.

**PS:** I think the reason why you get invited to talk about art practice, or aesthetic sensibilities or creative practice or design or architecture and so on, is because of how the topics expressed through the manifesto are resonating at the moment within art.

**HH:** I think theoretical, philosophical, or cultural studies conversations are almost like raw material for a different sort of processing. There's something to be taken up, and you do get some more direct responses to xenofeminism, Ryan Hammond's "Open Source Gender-codes" project being one of them. And there have been musical projects that take up xenofeminist themes, which is really interesting to see. But otherwise I think it gets digested in different ways, right? It is not always a literal thing; it's more taking the manifesto as a provocation and then like trying to tease that out in a different sort of language.

There is a twentieth-century tradition of putting on an exhibition if you want to get somebody to encounter an idea. I think there's an acknowledgement that the footfall is not going to necessarily be a substantial portion of the entire population; it's going to be a self-selecting group of people who've decided that they're interested in this, that they're willing to spend money on this half the time. What I am stating is the idea of a truly mass exhibition is something that we have largely left in the twentieth century. So, maybe that trenches on ideas of the digital in terms of new spaces of encounter, it's definitely not artistic institutions any more—maybe it's possible to reconceive institutional spaces and where work is encountered.

There are different ways of propagating ideas now, and so much of it is happening below the line in the comments and on social networks. Those become new spaces of encounter where you don't necessarily know who's going to stumble across it. This is part of the traction gained by that sort of format; it's this idea of investment to some extent—I don't want to say interactivity because that's such an exhausted word, but the idea that you can respond—and it leads to some interesting conclusions because sometimes the response takes precedence over the thing or article itself.

Look at the amount of times people comment on the headline and not an article, for example; it's an immediate response to something, a want to participate, you want to articulate something but you're not part of the frame, nobody's got time to read the whole article anyway, so it's a lot of very instinctive gut reactions.

**PS:** This is leading to something that you mentioned in the beginning of the conversation, on this idea of queerness being invisible. Growing up queer and using the Internet as a means of finding these spaces and communities that you just couldn't find in the real world allowed you to formulate some sort of identity. Invisible spaces being made visible is, seemingly, the same as shutting it down and closing it off and making it a reflection of real places. If our hiding places are being compromised, are fringe communities at risk of becoming homogenised? The space has been de-politicised. It's no longer a subversive space anymore. If a light is cast on it, representation becomes susceptible to a kind of normalisation that dilutes the radical or the transgressive aspects of these communities.

**HH:** There have always been intense debates about visibility as a strategy. I think it has a sort of tactical utility, only in specific situations. You cannot be visible and not face some risks; it depends on spaces in which you are part of and the context in which you find yourself. I think it is important to acknowledge that any claim for visibility will be context-dependent. But yeah, I think there's a very important point in there as well about solidarity networks and digital communities. There can be a tendency to assume that forms of interpersonal support that you get from online communities is not sufficient, or that it's not as good or as valid as what you get in face-to-face interactions. So, it overlooks exactly what you're talking about, which is that having access to face-to-face affinity groups and networks depends on where you are. It assumes a sort of metropolitan subject a lot of the time; if you're growing up in a village, it might be much more difficult to be visible as a queer person and not face fairly intense scrutiny and oppression from the people that you co-exist with. You can get very real forms of support from online communities.

It's almost like the second-wave feminist notion of the consciousness-raising group as being this sort of face-to-face network, which still dominates our conception of what real political community looks like. I think it is important to acknowledge, particularly for digital natives, that's just not the way things really

operate any more. There's a certain amount of agency that maybe comes with the increased anonymity of those online spaces, your ability to ask questions that you wouldn't want to ask even your close friends face-to-face; you know, there's much to be said about that, about those possibilities.

**PS:** I think that is a very good point to reiterate about agency and political communities and is a great place to wrap this conversation up.

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**KA Bird** is a queer, visual artist particularly interested in the use of digital media in her practice. She received a distinction in her MA in Fine Art from Teesside University in 2018, and is currently a studio holder at The NewBridge Project, Newcastle.

**Helen Hester** is Associate Professor of Media and Communications at the University of West London. Her research interests include technology, social reproduction, and the future of work, and she is a member of the international feminist working group Laboria Cuboniks. Her books include *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the Displacement of Sex* (SUNY Press, 2014), *Xenofeminism* (Polity, 2018), and *After Work: The Politics of Free Time* (Verso, 2018, with Nick Srnicek).



# Visual Essay

## Paul Stewart

**To Depart**

00:00 Resistance 1 :

00:04 To Depart

00:09 To Depart. Resistance is a symbolic gesture of the body

00:13 To Depart. Resistance is a symbolic gesture of the body. All active resistances, to what we see to what we hear, to what we say our bodily reactions.

00:25 What is this speech rising in the air while the object passes underground?

00:30 An act of resistance. in the music ends in a cry

00:00 Resistance 2 :

00:00 Resistance 3 :

active resistances

An act of resistance. in the music ends in a cry

An act of resistance. in the music ends  
in a cry

arrival & departure.

00:42

A scream to depart.  
We navigate our bodies in travel A tar-  
mac as liminal space a route needed of  
passage, arrival & departure.

It is not a site of existence but an object  
to be utilised.

It is in resistance-with the tarmac that  
we are able to travel

feet  
hands

form.

00:55

utilised. It is in resistance-with the tar-  
mac that we are able to travel

feet  
hands

form.

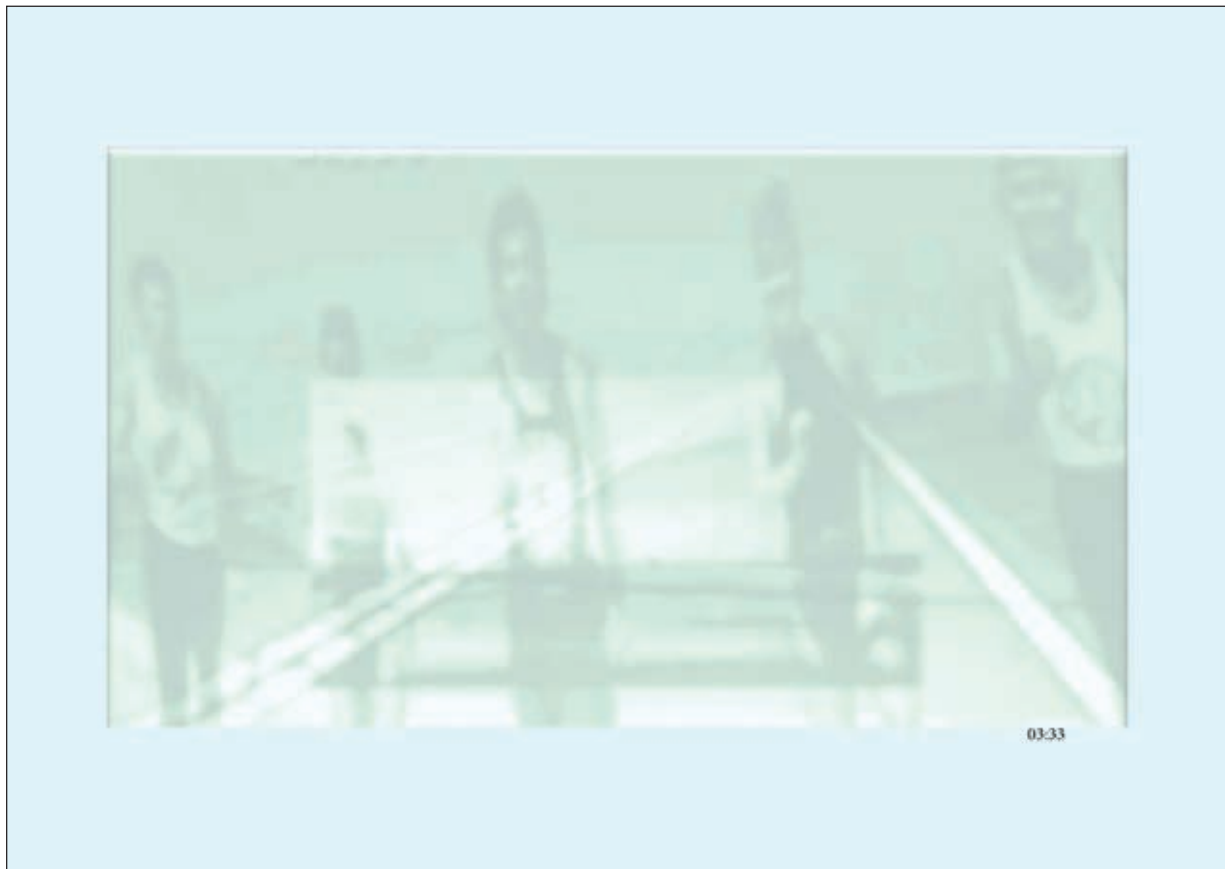
We must locate the tarmac first—  
to press against  
to push away  
to force down as the pressure allows  
momentum to move up.





02:03	the transition through symbolic moments, through physical perpetual moments,	02:03	the transition through symbolic moments, through physical perpetual moments,
	through the imaginary of the transition.		through the imaginary of the transition.
	It is not the act of beginning, it is not to stop it is not to arrive but is to see.		It is not the act of beginning, it is not to stop it is not to arrive but is to see.
	Our bodies and the surface beneath symbolise our desires, our relationships.		Our bodies and the surface beneath symbolise our desires, our relationships.
	Our transition collectively with our active resistance from below is our multiplicity, it is our proof of existence,		Our transition collectively with our active resistance from below is our multiplicity, it is our proof of existence,
	and it is my want of acknowledgment.		and it is my want of acknowledgment.
	If we embody our own roads, if we acknowledge our own beings, sexually, physically, symbolically		If we embody our own roads, if we acknowledge our own beings, sexually, physically, symbolically
02:50	We will finally see ourselves in the tarmac.	02:50	We will finally see ourselves in the tarmac.

The tarmac is the space of transmittance in a formation of pre-conceived ideas, a complete existence of the transitional space is its complete non-existence, necessary presence but never felt.	03:01	sexually, physically, symbolically.	We will finally see ourselves in the tarmac.	The tarmac is the space of transmittance in a formation of pre-conceived ideas, a complete existence of the transitional space is its complete non-existence, necessary presence but never felt.	03:15	Touched through need but not through love or through sentiment.	03:19	Touched through need but not through love or through sentiment.	03:21	Touched through need but not through love or through sentiment.
It has no feeling other than use.	It has no feeling other than use.	It has no feeling other than use.								



03:45 Our desires of ourselves in our form and in the form perceived by others are predefined by our imaginary.

We see our reflection in movement, a body captured between transition and resistance.

It is an instrument but cannot see its own music,

It is a movement that cannot see its own resistance.

It is a body which has yet to see its own reflection. It is a predefined transitional zone. It is a route travelled by all.

A route defined by one but used by a multitude.

04:08

Our desires of ourselves in our form and in the form perceived by others are predefined by our imaginary.

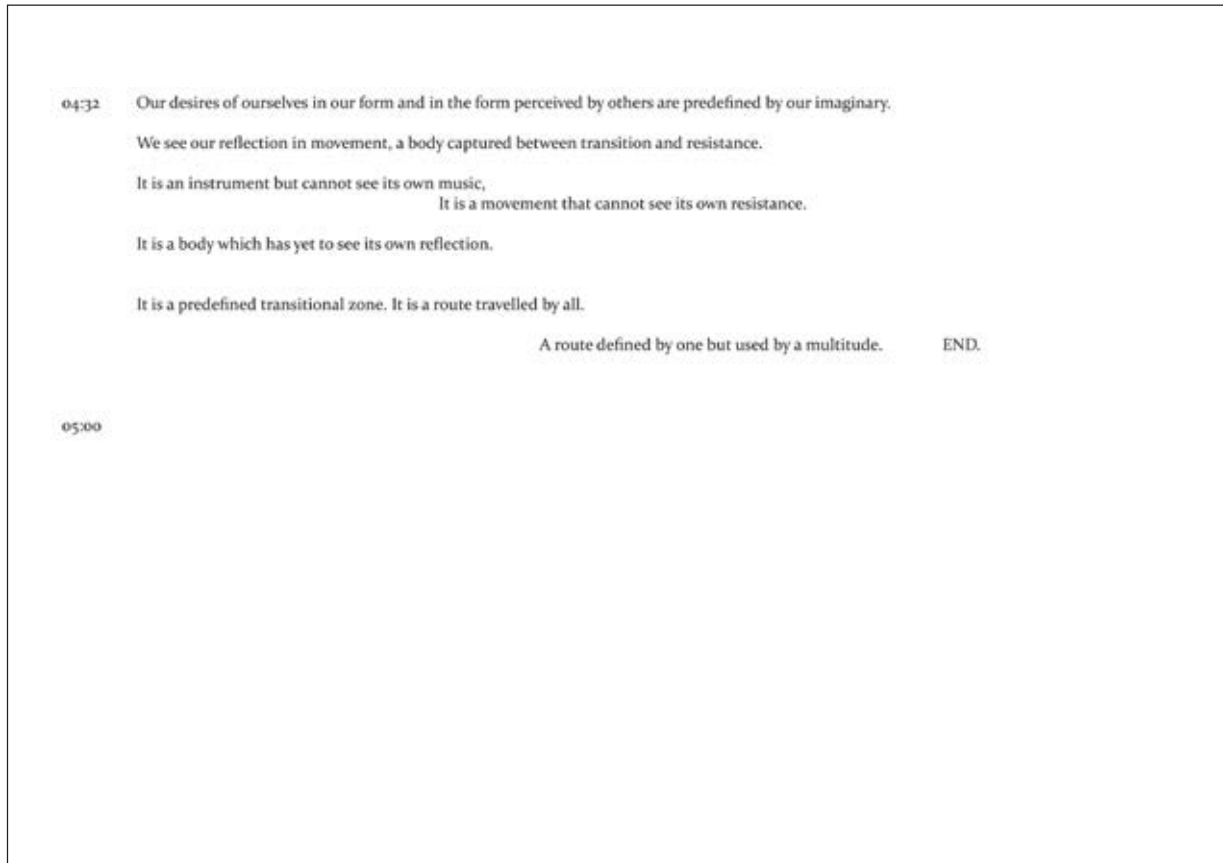
We see our reflection in movement, a body captured between transition and resistance.

It is an instrument but cannot see its own music,

It is a movement that cannot see its own resistance.

It is a body which has yet to see its own reflection. It is a predefined transitional zone.

It is a route travelled by all. A route defined by one but used by a multitude.



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**Paul Stewart** is an artist and researcher based in Middlesbrough. He is a lecturer in Fine Art at Teesside University. He has a PhD in Art and Philosophy (2018) from Teesside University and an MA in Art & Politics from Goldsmiths College, as well as an MA (Hons) Degree in Fine Art. He was the Research Associate for Creative Fuse NE and co-founder of the Middlesbrough Art Weekender, Bad Spirits, and the Alternative Art College. He has exhibited work and published around topics sitting at the intersection between art practice, the digital, politics, and critical pedagogy. His most recent work, which is a monograph looking into critical pedagogy as a methodology in art practice, will be published shortly.

# “Don’t Hate the Meme, Hate the Algorithm” Ruth Patir in Conversation with Joshua Simon

Joshua Simon and I have known each other for over a decade and a half. Our most recent endeavor was the exhibition *In the Liquid*, curated by Joshua for Print Screen Festival. This is a New Media festival in the city of Holon that took place in late 2018 in designer Ron Arad’s circular Design Museum building. Exploring the archaeology of the digital with the use of materials from the Internet itself, this exhibition is both essayistic and poetic with its deployment of a clear argument through documents and artworks that complement and expand on it. As part of the wider festival that dealt with the contrast between “Fake/Make” as well as concepts of fabrication as a productive and creative tool, and its uses for fraud and deceit, *In the Liquid* stretched along a

circular rotunda of lightboxes, vitrines, and screens, suggesting a long-form sentence with no beginning or end. The exhibition included, among other items, a 3D ‘glow in the dark’ printed gun, a bitcoin bank coin, a 1080i graphic card, a video of a 1984 Macintosh commercial, a book about the art of seduction, and hundreds of cans with Silicon Valley’s super-food Soylent Green. Since Joshua had recently relocated to Philadelphia, and in accordance with his plans, I set up the exhibition in the space. Working with a Google spreadsheet compiled of YouTube links to download, online images to print, and links for objects to buy, this was a scavenger hunt like of a modern-day Indiana Jones—linking up clues and making sense of them.



Josh Azzarella, *Untitled #24 (Green Gloves)*, 2006

**Ruth Patir:** You open the exhibition text with a quote from Rasmus Fleischer of Pirate Bay: “If fascism follows a failed revolution, then ours is the failed digital revolution,” which he said at Transmediale 2018. So, what he is saying is that the digital revolution has failed; that instead of democratizing information, the WWW is in fact a well-surveilled system that is monetized by private interest groups. This, I think, by now is a common belief. What I found particularly interesting in your show is that you managed to bring forward examples suggesting that the web was always meant to be this way—a site of surveillance. Could you elaborate on that?

**Joshua Simon:** The web was originally formulated as a Cold War technology for the US military developed by several subcontractors in US academia, and then given to for-profit private corporations to run. Anyone still under the impression this has anything to do with ‘public democratic space,’ if there ever was one, is probably willingly blind to this reality. In the exhibition, we brought materials, for example, from the Tech students’ newspaper at MIT, which shows the build-up towards the strike at MIT research (March 4, 1969) against the university’s development of warfare technologies including the ARPANET (predecessor of the Internet). On October 14, 1969, a demonstration at MIT arose against the Center for International Studies, which was working on US military counterespionage and propaganda projects at the time.

**RP:** The majority of materials in the exhibition are not artworks by artists. How did this project come about?

**JS:** I was finishing work on a three-year project, “The Kids Want Communism” (2015-2017), which included exhibitions of historical and commissioned works together with archival materials, screenings, debates, and publications with regard to the 99th anniversary of the Soviet revolution. The project was situated in the knowledge that our contemporary context is haunted by the spectres of anti-communism, to paraphrase the opening of the Communist Manifesto. I came across the broadcasting of a series of mass hypnosis shows (or “televised séances”) that took place in November of 1989, during the fall of the Berlin Wall, on the Central Channel of the USSR, and thought this makes for a great metaphor of our time. The hypnotist Anatoly Mikhailovich Kashpirovsky tried to heal the ailments of the Soviet citizens and divert their attention from the dramatic events unfolding in Berlin. This video opens *In the Liquid*, because of the meaning given to it. The prevalent interpretation maintains that in this hypnosis

show, an unresolved tension between reality and dream is staged. The conservative claim that informs the accepted interpretation of this event sees communism as a dream, hallucination, lie, illusion, while the fall of the Berlin Wall is likened to a wake-up call, an event in which actual reality erupted in full force, breaking through the layers of the dream. In our current reality, though, this interpretation falls short. Our condition is more complex—reality did not materialize; rather, we stepped into a dream within a dream, and this second dream pretends to be reality. Like in a Luis Buñuel film—we are in a false awakening. The conservative interpretation of the encounter between the television screen and the Iron Curtain sees communism as a collective hypnosis, while capitalism is a purportedly inescapable catastrophe. In this state of affairs, we no longer have access to the dream (a political project of equality), and the dream in which we exist (absolute inequality presenting itself as freedom) pretends to be reality. We are in a hallucination, but believe we are in reality, and at the same time have no access to any reality other than that hallucination, which de-facto defines any other reality as “a false dream.”

**RP:** You talk about this ideological false awakening as a hallucination that is at the same time the only available



The famous Wired magazine cover and issue from July 1997 with the title *The Long Boom*



-2-

February 3, 1976

An Open Letter to Hobbyists

To me, the most critical thing in the hobby market right now is the lack of good software courses, books and software itself. Without good software and an owner who understands programming, a hobby computer is wasted. Will quality software be written for the hobby market?

Almost a year ago, Paul Allen and myself, expecting the hobby market to expand, hired Monte Davidoff and developed Altair BASIC. Though the initial work took only two months, the three of us have spent most of the last year documenting, improving and adding features to BASIC. Now we have 4K, 8K, EXTENDED, ROM and DISK BASIC. The value of the computer time we have used exceeds \$40,000.

The feedback we have gotten from the hundreds of people who say they are using BASIC has all been positive. Two surprising things are apparent, however. 1) Most of these "users" never bought BASIC (less than 10% of all Altair owners have bought BASIC), and 2) The amount of royalties we have received from sales to hobbyists makes the time spent of Altair BASIC worth less than \$2 an hour.

Why is this? As the majority of hobbyists must be aware, most of you steal your software. Hardware must be paid for, but software is something to share. Who cares if the people who worked on it get paid?

Is this fair? One thing you don't do by stealing software is get back at MITS for some problem you may have had. MITS doesn't make money selling software. The royalty paid to us, the manual, the tape and the overhead make it a break-even operation. One thing you do do is prevent good software from being written. Who can afford to do professional work for nothing? What hobbyist can put 3-man years into programming, finding all bugs, documenting his product and distribute for free? The fact is, no one besides us has invested a lot of money in hobby software. We have written 6800 BASIC, and are writing 8080 APL and 6800 APL, but there is very little incentive to make this software available to hobbyists. Most directly, the thing you do is theft.

What about the guys who re-sell Altair BASIC, aren't they making money on hobby software? Yes, but those who have been reported to us may lose in the end. They are the ones who give hobbyists a bad name, and should be kicked out of any club meeting they show up at.

I would appreciate letters from any one who wants to pay up, or has a suggestion or comment. Just write me at 1180 Alvarado SE, #114, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87108. Nothing would please me more than being able to hire ten programmers and deluge the hobby market with good software.

*Bill Gates*  
Bill Gates  
General Partner, Micro-Soft

reality. We either think of the digital as a simulation of the real or as an extension to the real. How do you see these concepts of the digital relating to this?

**JS:** Physically, like this conversation being published online and produced via computers, also our correspondence on the exhibition as it was taking shape was online. So, there is great efficiency, it feels, in the digital. But at the same time, the digital is the perfect realm of this false awakening, through being a flat platform in shape but simultaneously a series of never-ending moments of immaterial labor. *In the Liquid* deals with the digital with materials from the real-existing-Internet to show this history. These included, among other things, Ronald Reagan’s speech on the silicon chip at the Moscow State University in 1988, Bill Gates’ infamous “Open Letter to Hobbyists” from January 1976, in which he asserts that software should be a licensed commodity like hardware, the 1978 Dead Kennedys song *California Über Alles*, a recent meme by Charles Lutz with Trump’s face and the caption “Don’t Hate The Meme, Hate the Algorithm,” the July 1997 *Wired Magazine* cover with the question, “We’re facing 25 years of prosperity, freedom, and a better environment for the whole world. You got a problem with that?” and many more. Basically, all these, and many other sources, show how instead of the digital revolution replacing existing social, political, and legal power structures with free interactions between

autonomous individuals as it set out to do, the digital basically became a monetizing system of control, and the 2018 graphic card shortage due to crypto-currency mining is just one of many examples.

**RP:** The connections you point out in this show are very much inspired by the notions articulated in the science of cybernetics, drawing connections between seemingly unrelated fields of interest in order to explore systems of controls and communication. Why do you think this as a field is interesting in its aesthetics?

**JS:** Like politics, curating deals with how things are organized. This steering, or control, is the literal meaning of the Greek word cybernetics (κυβερνητική). More generally, it refers to the art of governance. Funnily enough, it appears in this meaning in Plato’s *Alcibiades I*, a dialogue on which I worked extensively in my PhD but with no technological or digital discourse focus. As a science that has developed during the Second World War and came to dominate our understanding of how the social and natural worlds function, cybernetics offers feedback relations between adversaries. The preconceived notions this involves include perfectly intelligent, perfectly ruthless machine-human adversaries, as Norbert Wiener envisioned them. The quote you opened with by Rasmus Fleischer is a paraphrase of a saying attributed mistakenly to Walter Benjamin. But



Nimrod Kamer, *Wikiedit – The Change You Want To See In This World*, 2013

Benjamin’s famous remark in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that fascism aestheticizes politics while communism politicizes art, seems to be relevant to our moment, too. Now, with machine vision, algorithms, metadata, and the like, the aestheticization of politics is brought to perfection by its disappearance from the human eye. This is a theme I am interested in, and I have been working on *In the Liquid* parallel to developing a manuscript for a book about curating—*Metastability*, which should come out this year. A key term to understand politics in the digital age involves the notions of homophily (love-for-the-same) and consolidation (becoming-same), which Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has discussed in her work on the real-existing-Internet. These drive the logic of social media feeds, web searches, and overall navigation, where connections are made between like-minded nodes based on previous resemblance. In the book, I make the case that heterophily (love-for-the-different) drives curating and is manifested through the “many-body assemblies” which curating relies on and constitutes through constellations of display. As a practice of organizing meaning, exhibition-making becomes a model for addressing questions of power and organization, structure and action, not only as a critique of the objectivity of negative feedback loops, but as a potential intervention in these loops. Therefore, for me, *In the Liquid* is a reflection on curatorial practice as a form of organizing meaning that can complement, but also resist, the prevailing logic of the digital. And I must say, maybe as a final note, that I am compelled to reject any attempt to give technology any supremacy in making meaning. Meaning is made in the social factory, which involves also the development and usages of technologies.

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# (NON-)THINGS or Why Nostalgia for the Thing is Always Reactionary

## Dorothee Richter

The following argument is dedicated to the renewed wish for objects and materiality in art and curating. Thinking about things and non-things is also due to our present situation, since we cannot meet in real space, but in virtual space.

As the title indicates, an emphasis on things, new materialism, actor-network theory, and the like, always makes me feel uncomfortable, not to say unhappy. Have we not been here before, and have we not, with good reason, rejected the auratic view of things? What is the thing, or even the thing in itself, and why is there this cyclically recurring nostalgia for the thing in its pure aspect? Let us think about the question in a number of stages. Firstly, the present day; secondly, we will examine the positioning of the “thing”; thirdly, we will make an attempt at the deconstruction of subject and object, and fourthly, we will consider this thing in the context of the exhibiting institution.

### First: The Present

In an essay included in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, Vilém Flusser describes the historical moment of the digitalization of all aspects of life as follows: “Until recently, our environment consisted of things: houses and furniture, machines and motor vehicles, clothing and underwear, books and pictures, tins and cigarettes. There were also people in our environment, but science had largely made them into objects: like all other things, they are measurable, quantifiable and easily manipulated. In short, the environment was the condition in which we existed.”<sup>1</sup> Now, however, we have been catapulted into the world of non-things, and find ourselves, with some sense of disorientation, confronted with processes that we have difficulty understanding. In Flusser, the nostalgic tone is already perceptible: “Non-things now flood our environment from all directions, displacing things. These non-things are called ‘information.’”<sup>2</sup> And in what is envisaged as a phenomenological sketch, he attempts to describe these non-things: “It is immaterial information. The electronic pictures on the television screen, the data stored in computers, all the reels of film and microfilm, holograms and programs, are such ‘soft’ ware that any attempt to grasp them is bound to fail. These non-things are, in the true sense of the expression, ‘impossible to get hold of’. They are only open to decoding. Of course, as with old-style information, they also seem to be inscribed within things—in cathode-ray tubes, celluloid, micro-chips, laser beams. But although this sounds ‘ontological’, it is an ‘existential’ illusion. The material basis of new-style information is negligible from the existential point of view.”<sup>3</sup> As Flusser sees it, this leads to the environment in which we have to find and keep our bearings becoming ever “softer, more nebulous, more ghostly.”<sup>4</sup> As an art scholar trained on the works of Roland Barthes, I do not, of course, see an absolute difference between disparate processes of signification; meanings are produced when a number of signs are combined into new formations. The material form plays some part, but what ultimately counts is the ideological meaning. And yet precisely Flusser’s text shows clearly that the 0/1 machine has now become even more omnipresent: nowadays, all production and information processes are channelled through it, wholly new infra-

structures have come into being, and the former unity of space and time has been completely destroyed, as Peter Weibel described in vivid terms in a lecture on the transformation of space and time<sup>5</sup>: space was killed off long ago by the railways, he says; now the North Sea surges right up to our door, pictures from all over the world come flooding into our living rooms, and the landscape in between vanishes. Telecommunications initiate a new kind of communication; bodies remain in one place, whereas images can be reproduced at will: mobility and multiplication are now the order of the day. In the tele-society, the logic of distribution changes, Weibel says: it eliminates the power of place and instead brings us pictorial spaces that are detached from location and produce a ghostly simulation of distance. As a result, Weibel argues, the image acquires unprecedented power, images lose their historical, context-related character and become epistemic things, still objects but already signs, or perhaps still signs and already objects. So, it is at this moment of history that nostalgia for the object, for the aesthetic object, arises; it is precisely here and now that things are melting away, and their material substance, place, and presence are becoming nebulous. (That is why I see the actor-network theory or New Materialism as a symptom rather than anything else.)

### **Secondly: The Thing in Itself**

But let us look for a moment at the concept of the *Ding-an-sich*, the thing in itself as a specific Western concept, inscribed into exhibition history.

We know to whom we owe the thing in itself—to the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Here, I will be looking again at Immanuel Kant, in the company of Terry Eagleton.<sup>6</sup> I am turning to Eagleton because his interest is ultimately always focused on the living bodies of human beings. He investigates, from a post-Marxist perspective, what place “systems of thought” accord to subjects and objects, always bearing in mind the notion that ideological concepts also have material effects. Eagleton pays especial attention to those ideologies that hide behind a particular positioning of “aesthetics.” In this discussion, Kant plays a very significant role, if only because aesthetic theory accounts for such a huge part of his philosophical writings. Developing the ideas of Alexander Baumgarten,<sup>7</sup> Kant devotes many hundreds of pages to a detailed discussion of aesthetics and the faculty of judgment.

The way in which, in Kant, the individual, or subject, defines itself as pre-eminent is seen by Eagleton as following inevitably from the political practice of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois individual, as an active entrepreneur, has to be viewed as being self-determined and autonomous, in contrast to the worldview characteristic of the earlier, hierarchical state, in which a subject appears as determined by factors outside itself.

When, in Enlightenment philosophy, the subject is considered to be the master of the world, the world increasingly dissolves, or barely exists except in the experience of the subject. Thus, for example, Kant explains: “Time is therefore merely a subjective condition of our (human) intuition (which is always sensible, i.e., insofar as we are affected by objects), and in itself, outside the subject, is nothing.”<sup>8</sup>

The fantasy of technical omnipotence conceals a nightmare: in appropriating nature, you risk eradicating it. In this sense, self-assertion, if taken to extremes, turns against itself. At present, we are directly experiencing this in increasing environmental pollution and global warming.

As Eagleton sees it, for the bourgeoisie, property becomes the true mark of the subject, and respect for property the central value of that order. This, in itself, partly explains the bourgeois fascination with the object (the thing); unthinkingly, perhaps unconsciously, this fascination supports that order.

The bourgeois subject (authenticated by nothing but itself) requires some Other to assure itself that its powers and properties are more than hallucinatory, that activities have meaning. At the same time, such otherness threatens the subject's supposed sovereignty. According to Eagleton, this is the reason for the double nature of humanism: on the one hand, there is the mania for exerting power, on the other the depressing knowledge of being alone in the universe.

The subject is thus seen as being alive and active; productive activity secures objectivity (and objects), and thus connects the subject with the reality of the external world. If freedom is to flourish, if the subject is to extend its colonising sway over the world, this requires a certain level of knowledge. This being so, familiarity with and knowledge of other subjects is needed, which has led to study of the 'human sciences'—psychology, sociology, history, etc. There is, however, some contradiction between the desire for knowledge and the subject's claim to sovereignty: as Eagleton puts it, knowledge and freedom are in a curious sense antithetical. To put it differently, the subject's illusory position of sovereignty is undermined by the recognition of its dependence, of being locked into systems, and ultimately also by the recognition that all subjectivity is at bottom a construct. Kant sees the subject as noumenal (outside the conceptual order), and the object as the ultimately inaccessible thing in itself. For Kant, all cognition of others is purely phenomenal, since the secret springs of subjectivity are always inaccessible. "The subject is absolutely nothing whatsoever of an object—which is to say that it is a kind of nothing, that this vaunted liberty is also a vacancy."<sup>9</sup>

Aesthetic judgment is identified as an element that is capable of forming a bond between autonomous subjects: this is one sphere in which there can be a sense of community. According to Eagleton, the thing in itself is what the bourgeoisie—feeling alienated and fragmented by mutually isolating kinds of work—dreams of. The aesthetic object—but it alone—harbours an element of a utopian community. In aesthetic representation, we glimpse for a moment the possibility of a non-alienated object, one quite the reverse of a commodity. In another sense, however, this object, which acts as a point of exchange between subjects, can be read as a kind of spiritualised version of the commodity.<sup>10</sup> At a time when art objects are enjoying an absolute boom, Eagleton's observations appear startlingly prophetic.

### Thirdly: Subject/Object Deconstructions

It is well known that Kant saw the aesthetic as existing in two states: the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful affords support to the subject, while the sublime casts it down, conveying a feeling of its finiteness, decentering the subject. The sublime corresponds to a boundless totality that is beyond the scope of our feeble imagination. This is an interesting aspect of the aesthetic object. So, now, two factors undermine the subject's self-certainty: on the one hand, the sublime, and on the other the striving for knowledge, which has the effect of showing the subject, as it reflects on itself, that its own position is, in a variety of ways, one of dependence.

The theoretical shoring up of a subject that had become questionable culminated in the writings of Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan—if I may make the point in this brief and highly over-simplified form. In art scholarship, the feminist revision of art historiography picked up on (and still picks up on today) precisely this deconstruction of the firmly established, sovereign position of the subject, which, as one might expect, also lays down fixed constructions of gender.

For the present discussion, I would like to recall Roland Barthes's analysis of mythological constructions.<sup>11</sup> A sign, consisting of mental image and sound, is arbitrarily



Cover of Paris Match to which Roland Barthes refers in *Mythologies*

formed: *ein Baum, un arbre, a tree*, these very different acoustic images conjure up more or less similar mental images. This very fact shows that an object in itself, or a thing in itself, does **not** exist outside of the term denoting it. I can identify a strange combination of wood and fabric as a chair only if I am already familiar with the concept of a chair. When several signs are combined, this produces a deliberately assembled meaning or, in Barthes's terminology, a myth. He presents a variety of striking examples of such myth formations. The best-known of these examples is a *Paris Match* cover photograph of a black boy or very young man in uniform giving the French military salute. A myth de-historicises and de-contextualises: who is the boy, where did he live, what is his social and cultural background, what country is he from, did he go to school or receive military training, what ethnic group does he belong to—in short, what are the social and cultural conditions in which he and his salute are embedded? None of this is revealed. But the empty mould becomes filled with meaning—in this case, as Barthes sees it, willing acceptance of France's colonial claim to power.

Interestingly, the artist Vincent Meessen, who curated the Belgian Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, attempted, in his video investigation *Vita Nova* (2009), to find the boy and give him back his history. An ironic and yet wonderfully deconstructive appropriation of a theory.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the film, attention is drawn to Barthes's blind spot, his own post-colonial shadow, as it turns out that his grandfather, Gustave Binger, was once Governor of the Ivory Coast. This personal involvement is something that Barthes shies away from dealing with.

So, back to the thing/object, which even Bruno Latour (about whose actor-network theory I am very sceptical) has described in terms of a thing in a museum, according to Roger Fayet: "On the basis of the etymological relationship between the modern German *Ding* and the Old High German *Thing* (assembly, court), Latour only recognizes the object as being truly a thing once it is accepted into the circle of the *Thing*, that is to say, when it has become something spoken and negotiated about. Seen

in this light, the museum is a locus of the ‘thingization’ of objects—or, to follow Valéry’s more cautious formulation, a place where ‘thingizations’ are offered.”<sup>13</sup>

In Jacques Lacan’s writings, the thing appears in two states. Firstly, it appears as extant in the symbolic order. “Only what is integrated in the symbolic order ‘exists’ [...], since ‘there is no such thing as a prediscursive reality.’”<sup>14</sup> Unlike Saussure and Barthes, however, he sees the relationship between the signified and the signifier not as fixed but as varying; the connection between acoustic image and mental image is subject to constant changes. (And the dissolution of this connection would be a psychotic state.) The second state of an object is the *objet petit a*, the object of desire which we seek in the other.<sup>15</sup> The *objet petit a* is the object which can never be attained, which sets desire in motion; Lacan later calls it the “object-cause” of desire. The drives do not seek to attain it, but rather circle round it. The surplus represented by the *objet petit a* is surplus meaning and surplus enjoyment. “This concept is inspired by Marx’s concept of surplus value; *a* is the excess of *jouissance* which has no ‘use value’, but persists for the mere sake of enjoyment.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, for Lacan, the object is a wish, a longing, an idea that can never actually be realised, but that keeps desire alive (in the relationship between subjects, that is to say, the desire for the other).

#### Fourthly: Things in the Museum—Their Framing by the Exhibiting Institution

So, let us turn to the thing, which exists only in a discourse, or only intersubjectively, and which is moreover taken and set in the specific frame of the exhibition situation. What is the significance of the “framing” of the thing by the museum, or, one might say, by the institution that represents Art? As is well known, Tony Bennett drew attention to the fact that one of the aims of the bourgeois museum was to initiate its visitors, especially members of the working class, to middle-class modes of behaviour. Visitors to museums were instructed not to spit, not to whistle, not to be noisy, and so on. Thus, it is clear that class-specific messages are an intrinsic part of the museum.<sup>17</sup> Modernist glass buildings, which place the visitor-subject in situations affording an overview, also reinforce the subject’s illusion of occupying a self-confident (that is,



View into the picture room during the exhibition *Silence*, 1988

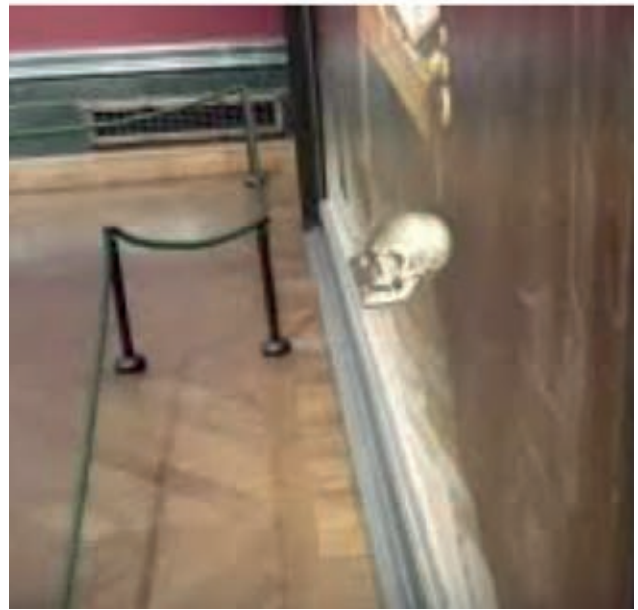


bourgeois-entrepreneurial) position. At the same time, the subject is visible from all directions, and this in turn suggests that surveillance functions are being shifted to within the subject, so that, as has often been argued, contemporary citizens monitor themselves. The fact that a work of art is present in a museum or art institution means that that object has passed through various acts of consecration. To adopt Foucault's argument, the discursive formation in a given instance—in this case the art academy, art market, art criticism, juries, the curatorial selection process, etc., or, correspondingly, anthropology and the authorities in that field—make use of complex mechanisms to determine which objects belong in a museum and which do not. When these objects then appear in the museum or art institution, they seem to be a “natural” part of it. “Natural” in this case means that by being placed on a pedestal or in a lighted glass cabinet, the objects are “ennobled.”

In contrast to this, a critical and democratic approach to museum work would aim to acknowledge openly the constraints and structures within which it operates, and to broaden and shift existing conditions implicit in museum work such as exclusions on racist and sexist grounds. There are some very successful examples of such an approach, some of which I would like to describe.

Michael Fehr vividly describes how, as the new director of the Osthaus Museum in Hagen, he attempted to transpose to the museum John Cage's *Music Score* (which became famous as *4'33"*) under the title *SILENCE*. At first, Fehr had hoped to work directly with Cage, but after Cage left Germany, Fehr unexpectedly found himself “without a supportive or protective artistic authority to back me up—unexpectedly in a kind of artistic mode [myself] [...]”<sup>18</sup> For Fehr, this was the start of a programme that made reference to Hagen's history and repeatedly took the town as its theme—not always to the delight of visitors and the press, as Fehr notes. Visitors were forced out of their comfort zone when they came to the museum, as the usual conventions were subverted. Fehr gives a graphic description: “The exhibition [*SILENCE*] showed a completely emptied museum: with the help of a workman I had, on the afternoon before the exhibition opened, removed everything that was in any way pictorial from the exhibition spaces, and we even dismantled the fountain and some lights that picked out details of the architecture.”<sup>19</sup> The three-day exhibition provoked a mixed and sometimes vehement reaction, but the surprising thing was that the visitors now started talking about artworks and types of architecture. “What emerged from it all was not only that, even outside the sphere of music, John Cage's *4'33"* concept [...] is far more than a formal idea, which is how I too had regarded the piece up to then, but that *SILENCE*, viewed and deployed as an artistic strategy, can produce quite disparate ‘noises’ or ‘texts’, depending on the particular context—in this case the building's history, which during the exhibition was practically oozing out of the walls, or was being projected on to the walls by the visitors.”<sup>20</sup>

Fehr goes on to analyse, above all, the role of memory as a narrative (and, I imagine, divergent) event taking place at any given present moment, and also the curatorial strategies he uses to reveal different layers of historical occurrences. However, what I consider important here is a different aspect, which I believe can trigger processes that lead to insight: the element of surprise, of disorientation, which makes a person's confidently held view begin to falter, as in the famous example of anamorphosis in the painting *The Ambassadors* by Hans Holbein the Younger 1533, which Lacan discusses. In the Lacanian example, the skull suddenly became visible when visitors turned back for a last look as they moved on, an unsettling experience that confronted them with the final, irrevocable splitting of the subject, namely their own death. This is, in Lacanian terminology, the irruption of the Real.



Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Ambassadors*, 1533

Lacan describes the disruption through the "Real" with the example of an anamorphosis, a moment which destabilizes the subject.

In an empty exhibition space, on the other hand, the visitor suddenly becomes visible as an observer, a voyeur, a constructed subject, a producer of narration, etc.<sup>21</sup> In a certain sense, we are likewise called into this unexpectedly empty space and caught there. The normal conventions for creating an exhibition and for visiting an exhibition are clearly shown to be a construct, to be the *habitus* associated with it. The gesture presumably also reveals the visitors to be a very homogeneous social group.

As a final example of an exhibition in which things began to talk, I would like to recall the famous exhibition *Mining the Museum* staged by the artist Fred Wilson at the Museum of the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992.<sup>22</sup> In the first room of the exhibition stood a large silver globe bearing the inscription "Truth"; one of the most talked-about exhibits was a glass case containing finely chiselled silver goblets and jugs of the kind owned by the upper echelons of society; at the centre of the arrange-



"Mining the Museum" staged by the artist Fred Wilson at the Museum of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore in 1992

ment lay some black metal fetters for slaves. In a talk given at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Wilson describes in detail how, for instance, he made audiotape recordings in which he gave a voice to the previously unnamed black children shown in the historical paintings.<sup>23</sup> He had the texts spoken by black children from the neighbourhood. A particularly moving and impressive example involves a picture showing, on the left, a black boy in a hunched posture, and on the right a white boy of about the same age standing upright and looking straight out of the picture. The black boy is turning his head to look up at the white boy; "Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?" a child asks on the audio track that Wilson produced to go with it. Wilson comments drily that he might quite possibly have been all three.

A reduced version of the exhibition was shown again, eight years long; the pram in which a Ku Klux Klan hood had been laid created an enormous stir. The art education staff telephoned Wilson with a question: a school class was coming to the exhibition,



Justus Engelhardt Kühn, Detail of *Henry Darnall III*, c. 1715



"Mining the Museum" staged by the artist Fred Wilson at the Museum of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore in 1992

and some of the children were Ku Klux Klan members; how should they deal with this? Just don't give them my phone number, Wilson joked. Wilson allowed the things to speak for themselves, but not, in the usual way, by elevating while decontextualizing them; instead he showed the process by which something becomes a museum object, and gave back to the things their context, their history, the means by which they were effective and their actual effects. He connected the things with their usefulness and those who benefited from their use; he gave the subjects their voices back.

To return to the beginning of my argument: it is reactionary, as Douglas Crimp has declared, when people enthuse about the abstract beauty of a helicopter, and progressive when questions are asked about its use, its effects, how those effects are achieved, and who the beneficiaries are. In the case of the beautiful, insect-like helicopter at MoMA described by an enthusiastic critic, Crimp deconstructed this style of presentation and such uncritical interpretation by pointing out that exactly this type of helicopter had been deployed in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras:



Bell-47D1 Helicopter hanging at MoMa, New York

“The hard facts are that Bell helicopters are manufactured by the Fort Worth corporation Textron, a major U.S. defense contractor, which supplies the Bell and Huey model helicopters used against the civilian populations of El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. But because the contemporary art of exhibition has taught us to distinguish between the political and the aesthetic, a *New York Times* editorial entitled ‘Marvelous MOMA’ was able to say of MOMA’s proud new object: ‘A helicopter, suspended from the ceiling, hovers over an escalator in the Museum of Modern Art [...]. The chopper is bright green, bug-eyed and beautiful. We know that it is beautiful because MOMA showed us the way to look at the 20th century.’”<sup>24</sup>

To come back to the beginning, the problem about a phantasmatic agency ascribed to objects (be that as New Materialism or as actor-network theory) is the blurring of structural violence. We as artists, curators, and theorists have to ask in which contexts do objects produce which meaning. And who is the actor in this constellation. Who is producing meaning, and who is the benefactor of a situation. The longing for materiality, for an object one could grasp, is due to the fact that through the overpowering mass of digital images, and by the withdrawal of the unquestionable presence of objects, and of other subjects, we all feel thrown into a shadowy co-habitation in time and space. This will go on, with or without a virus, for quite some time. So, we must be awake and discuss what images, artwork, exhibitions are putting forward. To do this needs words, needs curating, needs art: therefore, I would like to recommend this statement by Roland Barthes, as a starting point:

“Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.”

English translation by Judith Rosenthal

Dorothee Richter, "(Un)Dinge, oder warum die Sehnsucht nach dem Ding immer reaktionär ist," in *Interdisziplinäres Ausstellen*, eds. Sabine Fauland, Österreichischer Museumsbund, (Vienna: 2016), 8-15. ISSN 1015-6720 (slightly modified version for this publication).

## Notes

**1** Vilém Flusser, "The Non-Thing 1," in *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 85.

**2** *Ibid.*, 86.

**3** *Ibid.*, 86 et seq.

**4** *Ibid.*, 87.

**5** Peter Weibel, "Iconic Turn, Ortlosigkeit und Bilderfülle," from 46:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5llpNADoqYM>, accessed on 27 Dec. 2015.

**6** See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), Ch. 3, "The Kantian Imaginary," 70-101.

**7** Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Sinnliche Erkenntnis in der Philosophie des Rationalismus* (= *Aufklärung*, vol. 20), eds. Alexander Aichele and Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Meiner, 2008).

**8** Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 164.

**9** Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 75.

**10** *Ibid.*, 78.

**11** Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957).

**12** Katarina Gregos, "Raising the Phantoms of Empire: Post-Colonial Discourse in Recent Artists' Films," accessed on 27 Dec. 2015, <http://mousse magazine.it/articolo/mm?id=529>.

"Vincent Meessen's *Vita Nova* (2009) takes as its point of departure a cover photo from a 1955 issue of the French magazine *Paris Match*, in which a black child soldier is depicted making a military salute. The caption reads: 'The nights of the army. Little Diouf has come from Ouagadougou with his comrades, children reared by the A.O.F. army, to open the fantastic spectacle that the French Army presents this week at the Palais des Sports'. The artist embarks on a search for Diouf, the child soldier who is depicted, weaving an elaborate narrative that brings together a number of phantoms from the colonial past, and focusing on the figure of Roland Barthes—who wrote a critical text about this particular image. Historical fact, reality, artistic interpretation, and imagination are conflated, and the spectator is invited to piece together the fragments of the story, as timeframes become dislocated and chronologically disconnected. Drawing on a variety of media and archival material, as well as his own footage, Meessen creates a parallel, updated story in which a new character is born (*Vita Nova*) and with him, a new 'narrative. The film also brings to life the personal story of Roland Barthes, who is revisited by the phantom of post-colonialism, and resurrected in a black body. By the end of the film, it turns out that Barthes suppressed his own personal history; we discover that his grandfather, Gustave Binger, was the first governor of Côte d'Ivoire, thus implicating Barthes in the very narratives he wished to critique. *Vita Nova* reflects on the artifice involved in historiographical discourse, using the fiction of 'realism' and the experience of archives to arrive at a distinctive form of 'factual fiction'."

**13** Roger Fayet, "Ob ich nun spreche oder schweige," in Roger Fayet, *Im Land der Dinge. Museologische Erkundungen* (Baden: Hier + Jetzt, 2005), 13 et seq.

**14** Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 58.

**15** Ibid., 124 et seq.

**16** Ibid., 125.

**17** Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

**18** Michael Fehr, "Text und Kontext. Die Entwicklung eines Museums aus dem Kontext seiner Geschichte", in *Open Box: Künstlerische und wissenschaftliche Reflexionen des Museumsbegriffs* (Cologne: Wienand, 1998), 19.

**19** Ibid., 20.

**20** Ibid., p. 21.

**21** Lacan describes the effect of anamorphosis as follows: "It is, in short, an obvious way, no doubt an exceptional one, [...] of showing us that, as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1979), 92.

**22** Elisabeth Ginsberg on Fred Wilson's exhibition project, *Mining the Museum*, April 3, 1992 – February 28, 1993: "For instance, in the first room of the exhibit, the audience was confronted with a silver globe—an advertising industry award given at clubs in the first half of the century—bearing the single word 'Truth'. The trophy was flanked by, on the one side, a trio of portrait busts of prominent white men and, on the other side, three empty black pedestals. The busts were of Napoleon, Henry Clay, and Andrew Jackson. None of these worthies had ever lived in Maryland; they exemplified those deemed deserving of sculptural representation and subsequent museum acquisition. The empty busts were labeled Harriet Tubman, Benjamin Banneker, and Frederick Douglass, three important African-American Marylanders who were overlooked by the ostensibly 'local' institution." See <http://beautifultrouble.org/case/mining-the-museum/>, accessed on 11 Jan. 2016.

**23** Fred Wilson speaking at the Victoria and Albert Museum, "A Change of Heart—Fred Wilson's Impact on Museums", <https://vimeo.com/11838838>, accessed on 11 Jan. 2016.

The curator of The Contemporary referred to by Fred Wilson was Lisa Corrin; the founding director of The Contemporary was George Ciscle.

**24** Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge et al.: MIT Press, 1993), chapter entitled "The Art of Exhibition," 275.

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