

Press Release

Swiss Media Art: Studer/van den Berg, Maria Guta, Simone C Niquille - Pax Art Awards 2020

Exhibition: 09.06-15.08.2021

Opening days: 09.06-13.06.2021 with free entrance

Press tour: Wednesday, 09.06.2021, 11am (Please register via email)

Online opening: Wednesday, 09.06.2021, 6pm via Zoom (bit.ly/HeK_Vernissage)



Studer/ van den Berg, Palace for an Entity of Unknown Status (détail), le rendu, 2021. © Studer/van den Berg

The exhibition Swiss Media Art: Studer/van den Berg, Maria Guta, Simone C Niquille presents works by the winners of the Pax Art Awards 2020, on view in three parallel solo exhibitions. From Studer/van den Berg's fictional worlds created in digital space, to Maria Guta's reflections on identity and self-expression in social media and Simone C Niquille's playful but critical engagement with digital datasets, the three Swiss artists address themes that are as diverse as they are essential. Their different perspectives on poignant questions about society and technology investigate further-reaching connotations and future development. The artists could produce new works, which are presented to the public for the first time, thanks to the support from the Pax Art Awards.

Studer/van den Berg

The artist duo Monica Studer (*1960) and Christoph van den Berg (*1962) design, construct and create internet-based spaces, interactive installations and digital environments using game engines. The distinctive utopias they create in digital space and in mixed-media installations draw on various media and techniques, while often simulating idyllic nature. Extraordinarily detailed environments invite visitors to enter, explore and linger, such as *Hotel Vue des Alpes*, a virtual hotel where visitors can book and spend a picturesque mountain holiday online, launched in 2000 and resumed in 2020.

For their presentation at the HeK, the artists are showing two works from their series of new research projects for the Woodhead Foundation of Digital Consciousness (FOWDIB), an amusing parody of an institute that researches remarkably convincing scientific questions. One of these works is the premiere of *An Entity of Unknown Status* (2021), an installation centred around the fictional story of a learning algorithm

developed in South America, which disappeared and resurfaced when group of 68 activists in the Amazon rainforest were found to be worshipping it for quite some time before the FOWDIB stepped up to claim it. The presentation includes various artefacts, generative animations, documentary text panels, reconstructions of the original presentation in the Amazon, including provenances “from obscure archival sources” as the artists state.

Also on display is *T.R.I.P. Transcendence for Real and Implicit Personalities* (2008), which plays with the idea of a hypothetical research contribution to the drug-induced expansion of consciousness of digital devices. Based on the assertion that animated cyclical RGB colour gradients induce trance-like states not only in humans but also in digital devices, the work presents various forms of “pharmacograms” with which visitors and devices can interact.

Maria Guta

The work of Romanian-born artist Maria Guta (*1983), who lives and works in Switzerland, explores the mechanisms of self-representation in digital space. Constantly releasing new cyber identities, which she both conceives, curates and presents in front of the camera, Guta uses social media channels and web-based pop-cultural formats to stage and negotiate the roles and image of women online. Through photography, performance, installations and immersive digital tools such as virtual reality, she tests boundaries and potential of representation. The manifold characters and situations she creates that probe questions of identity and self-presentation are infused with subtle humour and skilful references to the practices in social networks.

The exhibition presents two of the artist’s new video works. *The Soothsayings of Iris* (2020) is the result of her collaboration with artist Lauren Huret. The work was inspired by the “73 Questions” format used by Vogue fashion magazine for interviews with celebrities. Here, Guta plays the role of a fictional character Iris, a new-age guru and influencer, who embodies traits typical of popular social network celebrities with lots of “followers”. The video examines the phenomenon of personality cult in the era of YouTubers and self-made influencers as well as their impact on pop culture.

The video *Dinner Party* (2021) was shot during the first Covid-related lockdown in Bucharest and reflects on coping mechanisms used to counter the loneliness, isolation and anxiety that arise in the face of pressure to stay connected and look good on social media. Guta took the work as an opportunity to stage and confront the different online personas she has created. The exhibition also presents a selection of images titled *The Many Lives of Lola Lane* (2018–21), which the artist has produced over the years for her alter-ego Instagram account “Dear_Lola_Lane”. As a fictional character, Lola Lane embodies stereotypes of self-representation on social media while questioning the criteria we use to judge the authenticity of self-representation. The image series provides insight into the multitude of avatars Guta has already embodied in her career.

Simone . Niquille

In her artistic practice, Simone C Niquille (*1987) playfully and critically explores how digital appliances influence the shape of our daily lives. Her theme, which she describes as “the digitalisation of biomass” sheds light on how the digital world is increasingly affecting our spatial and physical being as humans. When complex technological appliances, such as robots, are developed, the functions, biases and assumptions that theoretically shape our physical world are written into digital datasets and technologies to enable navigation. Through technical video documentation, design and architectural advertising materials, Niquille addresses – always somewhat tongue in cheek – how this data is processed and used to inform the artificial intelligence of everyday life.

The exhibition features her work *Homeschool* (2019), where she explores computer vision and the challenge of training an AI to recognise and comprehend objects in a domestic environment. The video shows the language, colour gradients and visual filters used to train such algorithms, while raising questions about categorisation, cultural bias and the exactitude of defining objects by a set of functions. The exhibition also features Niquille’s new video installation *Sorting Song* (2021), which revisits the theme of computer vision and can be considered a logical continuation of *Homeschool*. *Sorting Song* features

objects from the SceneNet RGB-D indoor training dataset, which was created at Imperial College London. Its large-scale collection of 3D meshes, floor plans and objects were compiled to develop computer vision for future domestic robots. The artist's narrative follows the form of an educational nursery rhyme, a *Sorting Song*, through which the protocols and data that shape the digital representation of the world are revealed.

The Pax Art Awards were presented for the first time during Art Basel 2018. The prizes are awarded to Swiss media artists whose works use media technologies or reflect on their effects. Half of the prize money is allocated to purchase a work for the Art Foundation Pax collection, the other half supports the artists in developing a new work, which is then shown as part of a comprehensive exhibition on all awardees in the spring of the following year.

The Art Foundation Pax is an independent foundation for the promotion of digital and media-based art in Switzerland and is financially supported by Pax. With the Pax Art Awards, ground-breaking prizes for digital art, the Art Foundation Pax in collaboration with HeK, honours and promotes media-specific practices of Swiss artists whose works use media technologies or reflect on their effects. The Pax Art Awards were first presented in June 2018.

The exhibition is accompanied by a comprehensive education programme, which will take place on site and online. Exhibition tours will take place regularly in German, English and French.

Curator: Boris Magrini

The exhibition was developed in collaboration with



Information:

HeK (Haus der elektronischen Künste Basel)
Freilager-Platz 9, 4142 Münchenstein/Basel

Press tour: Wednesday, 09.06.2021, 11am (Please register via elena.kuznik@hek.ch)

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Exhibition duration: 09.06-15.08.2021

Opening hours: Wed-Sun, 12am-18pm

Admission: 9 / 6 CHF (reduced price); Happy Hour (free admission): Wed-Fri 12-13am

Public guided tours: every Sunday at 15pm (German)

For more information visit: www.hek.ch

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About the HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel)

The Haus der elektronischen Künste Basel (HeK) is Switzerland's national competence center for all art forms that employ or reflect on new technologies and media. The HeK's interdisciplinary approach offers a broad public with insight into art production from various genres at the conjunction between art, media and technology. In a diverse program of exhibitions, smaller festival formats, performances and concerts, the HeK is dedicated to taking a closer look at current social issues and questions as well as technological and aesthetic developments. In addition to organizing exhibitions and events, the HeK is concerned with the methodology of collecting and the preservation of digital art.