

H3K

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House of
Electronic
Arts

Basel

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

09.06.–15.08.21

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, which are on view in three parallel solo exhibitions. The four Swiss artists deal with topics as different as they are important: Artist duo Studer/van den Berg invites us in fictional worlds in digital space, Maria Guta reflects on identity and self-portrayal in social media, and Simone C Niquille explores digital data sets in a playful but critical manner. From their distinct perspectives, they raise poignant questions about contemporary society and technology, while opening up possible connections and future developments.

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. Promoting media-specific practices by Swiss artists, the Pax Art Awards, awarded by the Art Foundation Pax in collaboration with HeK, provides seminal recognition in the realm of digital art. The main prize, which went to Studer/van den Berg in 2020, honours their long-established practice in the field of media art. The two other prizes honour the emerging new projects of Maria Guta and Simone C Niquille.

The Pax Art Awards have been presented since 2018, honouring Swiss media artists who employ media technologies or reflects on their effects. Half of the prize money is used to purchase a work by the Art Foundation Pax for its collection; the other half is used to support the winners in the development of new works, which are presented in a joint exhibition the following year.

The exhibition is accompanied by an extensive outreach programme that takes place in the museum and online. Guided tours regularly take place in German, English and French.

Curator: Boris Magrini

1 Studer/van den Berg
Wolfskind Project, 2021

The installation *Wolfskind Project* (2021) – premiering here – forms part of the series of new research projects launched by the FOWDIB (Fondation Woodhead for Digital Consciousness), a parody of an institute that digitally researches remarkably convincing scientific questions. It tells the fictional story of a learning algorithm developed in South America, referred to as the AI core, 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 rediscovered it. The presentation includes various artefacts, generative animations, documentary text panels and reconstructions of the original location of the activist community in the Amazon, which, according to the artists stem from obscure archival sources. The “Cloud Dumpling Palace”, which resembles a temple built from painted stones, houses one of the AI cores with which viewers can connect via an interactive livecam installation. There is also a magazine featuring all known facts about the phenomenon, including a detailed report where it is described in depth as the mysterious “Feral Child Project”.

2 Studer/van den Berg
T.R.I.P. Transcendence for Real and Implicit Personalities, 2008-2020

Another study of the FOWDIB is the work *T.R.I.P. Transcendence for Real and Implicit Personalities* (2008-2020). It plays with the idea of a hypothetical research contribution to the drug-induced of the consciousness of digital devices. The work is based on the assertion that animated cyclical RGB colour gradients induce trance-like states not only in humans but also in digital devices. Originally, in 2008, the project was developed as an online version. For this exhibition, a new application was created for Android smartphones in 2020, which can be downloaded and installed. The app puts users and their device into a shared trance state by enabling them to interact with various forms of “pharmacograms”, which the researchers say will have the effect of improving non-verbal communication between the devices and other users. T.R.I.P. is also intended as a response to the proliferation of communication devices and apps – sparked especially during the period of social distancing and isolation during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The artist duo Monica Studer (*1960) and Christoph van den Berg (*1962) design and construct internet-based spaces, interactive installations and digital environments using game engines. Their extraordinary creations, which subtly allude to the apparent replacement of the “real” world by the digital, invite visitors to enter, explore and linger. Their works have been shown at various national and international art institutions, including: 2019 Karachi Biennale; ZKM Karlsruhe; MMOMA Moscow; Fondation Beyeler, Riehen; Kunsthalle Mainz; S.M.A.K., Gent; NEoN Digital Arts Festival, Dundee; Kunstmuseum Thun; Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg; Frac Alsace Sélestat; Kunsthaus Zürich; 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa; Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris; Kunstverein Hannover; Steirischer Herbst, Graz; and Centre d’Art Contemporain, Geneva.

3 Maria Guta
The Many Lives of Lola Lane, 2015-2021

Complementing Guta’s latest video works, *The Many Lives of Lola Lane* (2015-2021) consists of a selection of images produced over the years for the artist’s alter-ego Instagram account *dear_lola_lane*. As a fictional character, Lola Lane personifies a wide range of stereotypes of female self-presentation known from social media, challenging our notions of authenticity and self-expression. The image series shows the remarkable array of fictional characters Guta has already embodied in her career.

4 Maria Guta
The Soothsayings of Iris, 2020

Guta’s recent work *The Soothsayings of Iris* (2020) is the result of her collaboration with the French-Swiss artist Lauren Huret. Here, Guta slips into the role of a new-age guru and influencer called Iris, who – in a manner that seems at once laid back, controlled and rather arrogant – ambles through the rooms of her luxurious villa and its surroundings answering questions directed at her by an off-screen voice. The work is inspired by Vogue magazine’s “73 Questions” format, used to interview celebrities on YouTube. Iris’ fictional character embodies traits typical of popular social network celebrities. The video is a commentary on the pop cultural phenomenon of the personality cult of in our era of YouTubers and self-made influencers.

5 **Maria Guta**
Dinner Party, 2021

Guta's new work *Dinner Party* (2021) was shot during the first Covid-19-related lockdown in Bucharest. Here she takes on the roles of all eight women she has assembled around her table, their very different and strong personalities are also emphasised by their dresses and accessories. As time passes and the music starts, the mood darkens increasingly and the characters' nervous tension becomes visible as they move about restlessly on the chairs. Finally, all the dinner guests are reflected in the picture frames hanging on the wall behind the table. Like in an advertising screen, the images are ironically subtitled with the soothing phrase "You are not alone, we are here with you". The video reflects on issues of coping with loneliness, isolation and anxiety in the face of pressures to stay connected, playing different roles on social media. For this work, Guta draws on online personas she previously created, confronting them with each other.

Born in Romania and working in Switzerland, Maria Guta (*1983) often focuses on mechanisms of self-representation in digital space. Using photography, performance, installations and immersive digital technologies such as virtual reality, Guta tests the boundaries and possibilities of representation. Guta has shown her work at Gessnerallee, Zurich; New Frontier, Sundance Film Festival, Park City; Geneva International Film Festival (GIFF), Geneva; Backslash Festival, Zurich; Shape Platform (Scena 9), Bucharest; World VR Forum, Crans-Montana. Her works have been exhibited in various national and international art institutions including: Locarno Film Festival; Swissnex, San Francisco; Scena 9, Bucharest; LAC Local d'Art Contemporain, Vevey; Istituto Svizzero, Milan; SomoS Art House, Berlin; Arsenic – Centre d'art scénique contemporain, Lausanne; Porny Days, Film Kunst Festival, Zurich; Réunion (ECAL), Zurich; and Nicolas G. Hayek Center, Tokyo.

On 13 and 14 August 2021, HeK will be hosting her live performance *Cyberia*, a collaboration with Romanian artist and musician Adrian Ganea.

6 **Simone C Niquille**
Sorting Song, 2021

The artist's new video installation takes up the theme of computer vision addressed in her earlier works. *Sorting Song* (2021) features objects from the Scene Net-RGB-D dataset, an AI-based application designed to provide algorithms with a basic understanding for recognising objects or more complex collections of objects. Created by Imperial College London as a large-scale collection of 3D meshes, floor plans and objects, the dataset is used to develop computer vision for future household robots. The narrative developed around a nursery rhyme brings to light the protocols and data that shape learning processes and digital representations of the world. *Sorting Song* makes it distinctively clear how categorisation is hardly an innocent sorting of objects by properties, but implies a value system and introduces cultural bias to automated object recognition. What happens when a toy gun is falsely recognised as real? What are the consequences of AI misreading objects and contexts? The video also raises questions about the role of physical experience in understanding; for example, unlike computers, humans can draw on the experience of sitting when grasping the nature and definition of a chair.

7 **Simone C Niquille**
Regarding the Pain of SpotMini, 2018

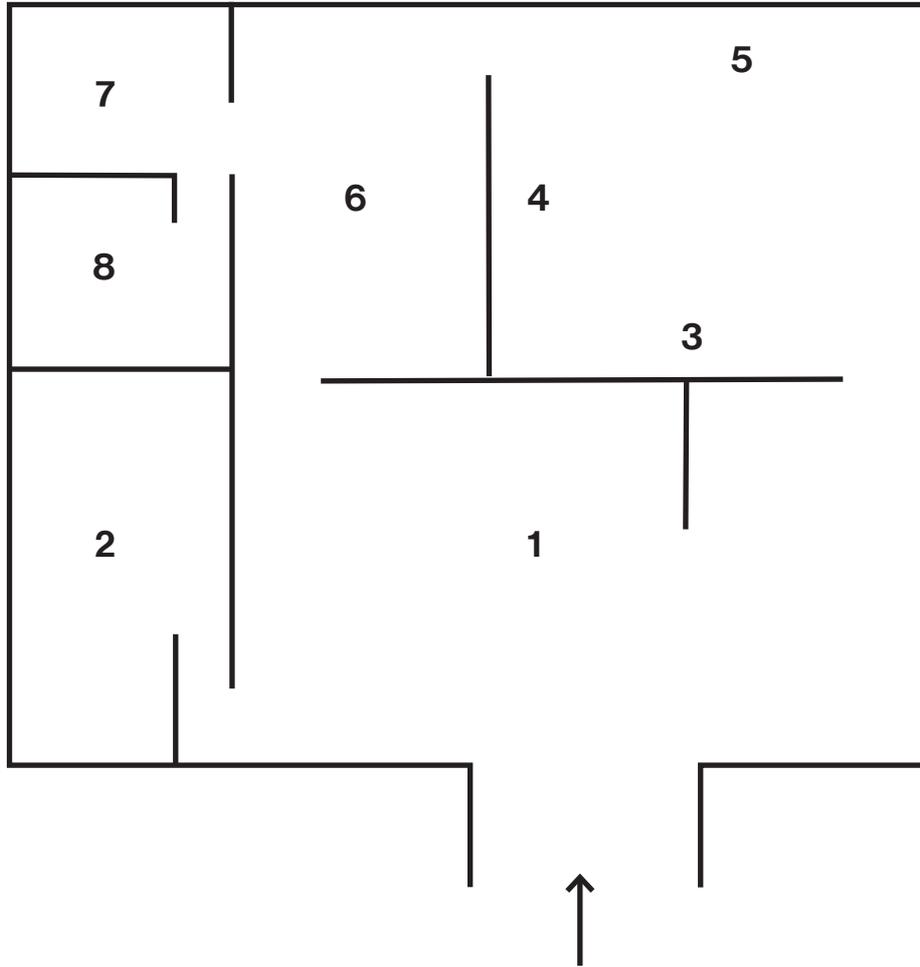
Here Niquille explores the difficulties and consequences of how computer vision functions. Since the recognition of objects and people in a real environment is prerequisite for a robot to autonomously navigate a space, vision programming is a central field of research in robotics. SpotMini, the video's protagonist, was designed for the commercial market by Boston Dynamics, an American company specialised in developing mobile robots for military tasks, rescue operations and logistics. Niquille recreated in a 3D environment the test house used by Boston Dynamics to train their household robots. Since the test house was equipped with average furniture from western shop repertoires, Niquille was able to simulate it with standardised 3D models of western furniture that were already available online. On the one hand, the work is a reflection on the standardisation of furniture and the lack of cultural diversity reflected in the training of household robots like SpotMini. It also raises

the question of whether our homes in the future will increasingly be designed to enable and facilitate the presence of domestic robots.

8 Simone C Niquille
Homeschool, 2019

Homeschool (2019) also explores computer vision, this time focusing on the challenge of training an AI to recognise objects in a domestic environment. While showing the language, colour gradients and visual filters used to train algorithms, the work raises questions about categorisation, cultural coding and the reduction of objects to a limited number of functions. *Homeschool* takes a closer look at the denoising strategy used in 3D-environment algorithm training, a filter trained with tens of thousands of images to reduce the surrounding's image noise and adjust information to allow better and faster object recognition. Niquille shows us the denoising algorithm's perspective and gives us insight into how computer vision's underlying mechanism functions, revealing how its pattern-recognition-based understanding substantially differs from our context-dependent grasp of reality around us.

Swiss-born, Dutch-based artist Simone C Niquille (*1987) explores the influence of digital tools on our lives in her artistic practice. Her works, which are often in documentary-like videos and installations, deal with how AI processes and uses data sets in everyday life. Her work has been shown in various international contexts, such as: Tetem, Enschede; Dutch Pavillion, 16th Venice Architecture Biennale; Swissnex, San Francisco; Istanbul Design Biennale 2018; IMPAKT Festival, Utrecht; AND Festival, Peak District; TodaysArt, The Hague; Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam; ByDesign Film Festival, Seattle; Biennale of Urbanism & Architecture 2015, Shenzhen; and Design Miami Basel.



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