Rabbit Hole: Photography, Magic and Reality
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Marion Balac
Jojakim Cortis & Adrian Sonderegger
Miha Godec & Valerie Wolf Gang
Miha Godec
Simon Menner
Špela Škulj

Curators
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“The Rabbit Hole projects simultaneously question the present-day reality and unveil the ways of its technological embeddedness while hinting on the possibilities of its future permutations. Are we really in contact with reality? Or are we left at the mercy of constant flickering and perpetually changing simulations, copies, and representations? Which one is the right one? But, truly, is this even the right question? The exhibition projects revolve around of the failed encounter of the reality and photography – on their descent into phantasmagorical landscapes of contemporary visibility and on the social consequences of the intoxication that this rapid descent brings.”
The Google robot automatically blurs every face it recognizes – including the ones of the statues. In Las Vegas as seen through a Google Street View, the Sphinx’s flamboyant mask of Tutankhamun has been swapped for the eroded face of its Egyptian model. Because, as indicated by the American company, “if one of our images contains an identifiable face [...] our technology automatically blurs certain elements to prevent that person from being identified.” Blurred by Google, all faces are equal, regardless of scale. Anonymous Gods offers us the point of view of a robot that makes no distinction between either humans and their representations, or the sacred and the profane. So these large statues – whether religious or commercial – are hidden from their seated observers on the other side.

Marion Balac is an artist and researcher at the ESACM Fine Arts School in France. Her work explores the impulses and interactions between feelings and technology, approaching them through a variety of media as a means to investigate the tensions and bonds between individual and mass behaviours. Her work has been included in group exhibitions and screenings at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac (Paris Pantin) for Jeune Création, Fabra i Coats – Centre d’Art Contemporani (Barcelona), LOOP Barcelona, Annka Kultys Gallery (London), Cité Internationale des Arts (Paris), Enclave Projects (London), Paradise Works (Manchester), Bandits-Mages (Bourges), Espace des Blancs-Manteaux (Paris), l’Abbaye (Annecy-le-Vieux), Galerie Neuf (Nancy), Hectoliter Gallery (Brussels), Musée Saint-Raymond (Toulouse).

Icons project is an enticing game played with images from the history of international photography that are frequently cited and revered as icons. The Zurich-based artist-duo Cortis & Sonderegger have been working for almost five years on this large-scale photographic project which is visually captivating not only on account of its concept, but also its diversity and aesthetic force. They built three-dimensional models in their studio, in order to recreate two-dimensional images that have become entrenched in our collective memory. This bricolage involves paper, cardboard, sand, wood, fabric, cotton wool, polystyrene, plaster, cement, paint and a lot of glue. These constructions are then photographed from a particular angle, representing two-dimensional images that are astonishingly close to the photographs of the original real scene. The artists do not just restrict themselves to creating an illusion that looks deceptively real. By integrating the studio surroundings into their works, including traces of the production process and the instruments used, the artists constantly indicate that different levels of reality are being intermingled here, and that the illusion is just that, merely an illusion.

Jojakim Cortis, born 1978 in Germany, and Adrian Sonderegger, born 1980 in Switzerland, met at the Zurich University of the Arts in Switzerland. Both studied photography and their collaboration began during their lessons and continues to this day. Since graduating in 2006, they have worked as freelance photographers and teachers for various art schools. Their photographs have been shown in numerous exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad, including at the Images Festival in Vevey (CH), the Museum Folkwang in Essen (D), the Fotostiftung Schweiz (CH) and the C/O Berlin (D), as well as at festivals in France, Poland, Sweden and China. Their book Double Take, which they published in 2018, was released in English by Thames & Hudson in Great Britain and the USA, in German by Lars Müller Publisher (CH) and in Japanese by Seigensha (JP).
Searching for 'ōō' is a 360-degree photo and sound installation. The user is confronted with a 360-degree spherical photograph representing a place that exists now but will not be here for much longer, an island called Naranjo Chico which is one of 370 low-lying islands of the San Blas Archipelago. Four of the San Blas islands are inhabited by indigenous people called Guna. They speak their own language and enjoy an autonomous region inside the country of Panama. Researchers say that the sea could rise by 2 meters due to climate change by the year 2100, which would sink the islands. Some scientists even say that the islands will be uninhabited in 20 to 30 years' time. The Guna people will not disappear by the rising sea, but this will significantly change the way they live. They will have to move to the mainland where they will face new and different problems like malaria.

If you listen carefully, you can hear a birdsong. It’s the haunting beauty of a love song lost amidst the shrill sounds of commercial exploitation. It is a song by a bird called The Kaua‘i ‘ōō from a family of Australian-Pacific honeyeaters. This species is now extinct due to habitat destruction, however, the related cause for extinction was human intervention. What you are hearing does not exist anymore. It’s a song last heard in 1987. The bird is all alone, the last of its kind, calling for a female that will never come.

Miha Godec (1988, Slovenia) carved out his professional career as a photographer after graduating from the School of Arts, University of Nova Gorica (UNG AU), in 2014. Godec received further education in Portugal, at the ESAD College of Art and Design. He has held several one-man shows and took part in group photo and intermedia exhibitions. In addition to creating artworks, Godec teaches photography and virtual reality, and conducts educational scientific and art workshops. He is committed to developing new projects that investigate the impacts of anthropogenic activity on aquatic ecosystems.
The project’s main feature is a spatial installation consisting of a pedestal that enables visitors to put their heads into the 3D-printed head of Michelangelo’s David and thus see from his viewpoint; what the visitor see is a spatial scene that relates to the future and the impact of modern technologies on life. The visitor on the pedestal symbolically becomes David. The viewers become part of the installation. Different techniques are included in the production of the installation: 3D scanning and design, 3D printing, programming, AI, VR, EEG, neural networks and other technological approaches, while at the same time it is about working with materials and the very process of cooperation between man and technology.

Inside the head there is a specially designed EEG machine and other sensors that measure the user’s subconscious impulses which influence the content of the video inside VR glasses, so everyone gets a unique experience. David’s head thus becomes a medium between reality and virtuality and, most importantly, the user’s impulses – read by the installation – interactively influence the course of the narrative unfolding inside virtual reality. The project creates a symbiosis of human and artificial intelligence, which seeks to steal man’s dreams and harvest our sense of creativity.

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Valerie Wolf Gang (1990, Ljubljana) is a Slovenian intermedia and video artist, director and pedagogue whose work mainly probes into the relationship between man and technology. The art of Valerie Wolf Gang, who regularly collaborates with various experts and artist collectives, is showcased at several international galleries. She has founded UV Arthouse, a production house focused on experimental films and video installations, and dedicated herself to exploring the possibilities of new media technology and interactive multimedia art. Her films have screened at various international festivals. She is currently working on her doctoral thesis on augmented reality and is a professional associate at the Institute of Fine Arts Vienna.
Miha Godec & Valerie Wolf Gang, *David’s Gaze*, 2019
Simon Menner

*Camouflage*

2010

Even though they are invisible due to their professionalism, there are hidden snipers in every of these images. They are aiming at the camera and therefore at the viewer. I received a very friendly assistance from the German, Lithuanian and Latvian Armies that supported this project by granting me generous access to their snipers. I am extremely grateful for the openness I encountered.

Simon Menner earned a diploma (2006) and subsequently an MFA (2007) from the Universität der Künste Berlin, in both cases as a student of Stan Douglas. He spent time as a student at the School of the Art Institute Chicago. Menner has exhibited his work in photography internationally and held solo and group shows. His work was featured widely by Arte, *The Guardian*, Der Spiegel, BBC, *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, CNN, *Frieze*, Vice, *Wired* and many others. Menner has received a number of stipends and awards, such as a working grant of the Berlin Senate in 2015, a working grant of the German Stiftung Kunstfonds in 2014 and the Presidential Award of the Universität der Künste Berlin for best diploma in 2007.
Špela Škulj
*Limbo I & II*
2020

Špela Škulj’s *Limbo* explores how the perception of landscape and common phenomena changes due to a shift in perspective. This spatial photography installation consists of a sequence of layered photos that are losing their two-dimensionality and assuming an increasingly object-like form. When separate object layers are observed from different viewpoints a parallax arises, thus creating an impression of illusional motion between layers and the background. Incorporated drawings render the imaginary photographic landscape even more impalpable and utopian. The artwork approaches the notion of landscape as an idea, a process of perception complemented by the presence of the observer and the act of viewing. This is because landscape is never merely an unidentified space, but a product of a specific time and place that identify it both at the semantic and visual level. Due to the layering of images, signs of human presence and (self-)destructiveness gradually take shape in an ostensibly pristine and idyllic landscape, creating a sense of anxiety and uncertainty.

Špela Škulj (1982) is a visual artist working in the fields of contemporary photography, video and light. Using a style of expression that comes closest to personal documentarism, Škulj draws inspiration from her background in cultural studies. Her works often address the topics of ecology and irreversible human impact on environment, adopting a posthumanist worldview to examine the issues of solitude and the meaninglessness of human existence in contemporary world. She has showcased her work in solo and group exhibitions at home and abroad. She was shortlisted for the 2019 OHO Young Visual Artist Award and won Photon’s 2nd Photobook Competition with Premiki.
Rabbit Hole – Photography, Magic, and Reality
(Or a Brief Account on Art as Contemporary Magic)

Jan Babnik
Exhibition text

Since the invention of photography, our relationship with the medium – the image-taking social apparatus and photographs as objects – has always been invested with a set of beliefs in the potent, almost magical power of photography. From the early belief in the power of photography to “steal souls” to the present-day belief in its power to “steal data”, our understanding of the origin of the medium’s special power has changed and evolved – from being anchored in the perception of photography as a magical emanation of reality to currently stemming from its embeddedness in data systems (and its power of manipulation) within the omnipresent apparatus of social surveillance. In practices as diverse as photojournalism and spiritualism, photography has been invested with the notion that it can reveal more than the human eye, piercing the reality and turning unseen into seen, absent into present, distant into close, transgressing both the limitations of human perception and physical limitations of space and time. That it builds illusory and fantastical landscapes, whilst dispelling illusory perceptions of the world. Photography has created a new – expressly photographic – dimension of seeing and has never ceased to excite our explorative spirit in probing into the unknown, invisible, incomprehensible, exaggerated, and enchanted – i.e. the world of magic.

This special power of photography has persisted to this very day, with the difference that the once-time “analogue” magic has been replaced by a new, much more elusive, uncontrollable and inscrutable magic of algorithmic equations, machine vision, virtual and augmented realities – the magic of our dystopic future. Photography has never been denied its original mystical aspects – and thus continues to be one of the most magical modern-day technologies.

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In An Historical and Ethnological Survey of the Cuna Indians from 1938 Erland Nordeskiold wrote:

When a Cuna Indian is very sick, the curer takes illustrated magazines, trade catalogues, and newspapers, and places them around the sick person’s hut. Then they burn the images, releasing their souls or purbas. The souls of burnt images than go about setting up a store or emporium full of fascinating items. When the evil spirits come to invade the sick person, they are so taken by the show of wares that they do not enter the sick person’s body. Instead of killing the sick person, the evil spirits, in effect, go shopping. (Nordeskiold in Taussig 1993, 134)

This shamanistic ritual of using the power of the images to cure the sick was a procedure of healing snake bites, and it was thought by the Cuna community that it is not only the body of the sick person that is in danger but rather the community as a whole – the social body. It was believed, that “as with all serious problems, the snakebite attracts dangerous spirits to the village of the bitten person” (Taussig 1993, 133). During the time of the healing, the community was recommended to remain completely silent in order to not disturb the patient with the spectres, purbas of the sounds – so as to not “jolt” the patient’s purba writes down Michael Taussig in his description of the ritual. After burning the images, the ashes were scattered around the hut. Taussig neatly summarises the logic of the ritual: “The Soul of the Commodity Is Its Image which, Released on Burning, Fascinates Dangerous Spirits and Keeps Them from Doing Harm to Cunas” (Taussig 1993, 133). In the early 20th century Cuna indigenous used the effect of phantasmagoria for the distraction of the evil spectre’s “senses”. They used the power of the images or rather the emanations, spirits, spectres of photographs to combat against the perceived danger to the community (after all it was the contagion aspect of the dangerous spirits touch that was worrying them). It was three years before that Walter Benjamin wrote about commodity fetishism, magic, technology, images and phantasmagorical effect in one of his most influential essays “The Art of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” where he lucidly stated that the “unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art” is based in social rituals whereas technology emancipated art from its “parasitic subservience to ritual” (Benjamin 2002, 106).

What makes the story of the healing-images ritual even more captivating is the knowledge of Cuna shamanistic chanting tradition as described by anthropologists. The chant of a medicine man conjures the medicine into being by accurate description (naming) and by simultaneous description of the very process used to bring it into being. The shaman introduces its modus operandi into the chant, thus bringing forth the medicinal powers. The chanting, which lasted for hours, goes on like this:

The medicine man begins to counsel your silver bark, your silver bark’s purpa is coming to life; medicines you are being changed, you are becoming medicines ... In the small basket he is placing your silver bark, all in pairs, all in pairs ... (Taussig 1993, 107)

Through chants “those sung over the sick as well as those sung over medicines […] through detailed description, power is gained over the thing described” (Taussig 1993, 105). It is precisely through accurate description and importantly self-referentially (putting the
subject creator “into the picture”) that the shaman gains control over reality – not by hiding the operations but through revealing them (as in a magic trick that would in reality be the “making of” the trick). It is surprising how much power lies in a simple, almost unpretentious, humble, mimetic, descriptive act.

The constructed sculptural photoobjects of Jojakim Cortis & Adrian Sonderegger from the series Icons are depictions of the authors’ “making of” the reconstructions of the iconic historical photographs (such as the burning twin towers, Niepce’s first photograph, Capa’s falling soldier in the Spanish Civil War, etc.). What we at the first glance recognise as a photograph, is revealed to be a sculptural recreation of the scene, the work clearly showing the staging process. They are their own production process, done by the logic akin to Cuna magical chanting. It seems as if the authors would try to dispel the reality from the images, reminding us of the spectral and uncertain reality of iconic images burnt into the collective memory (mostly of the West) and of the spectral process of the very historicism (of both of history and art) that brought these images into the collective memory in the first place.

Like produces like; contact results in contagion; the image produces the object itself; a part is seen to be the same as the whole. (Mauss 2005, 15)

We could look no further than Cortis & Sonderegger, Making of “La cour du domaine du Gras” to see an excellent example of the process of image producing its own object. What we all know as the first photograph View from the window at Le Gras (Paysage à saint-Loup de Varennes) by Niepce from cca. 1826 is “in truth” a painting after a drawing. “Found” and prepared for public viewing by Helmut Gernsheim and first published in The Times, April 15, 1952 and mass reproduced henceforth. The painting was supposed to accentuate the features of otherwise unsuccessful attempt of reproduction of the original Niepce’s plate (in which almost nothing could be discerned) and was motivated partly by the Niepce’s own descriptions of what can be seen in the view from the window in Le Gras and done after the Gernsheim’s drawing of the original plate (see Tagg 2015).

What do we see in Cortis & Sonderegger’s Making of “La cour du domaine du Gras”? A photograph of a spatial, sculptural installation (i.e. the space structured around the notion that it is going to be photographed, revealing the process of its making) mimicking the first photograph ever (i.e. mimicking the author’s idea of the first photograph, which in fact is Gernsheim’s idea made collective history), which is in fact a painting done after the drawing (i.e. painting which was supposed to accentuate the photographic features seen on a drawing made after a failed reproduction, which in turn was “mimicking” the idea of what the first photograph should look like based on description of the view). In the case of this image Icons series takes us rather unwittingly even further down the rabbit hole of truth, meaning, illusion, history (and constructedness of it all) than the project could initially hope for.

It is immensely apt that Miha Godec’s project, a spherical panorama and sound installation Searching for ò-ò shows the spherical VR scene on the island where the Cuna indigenous live. The island will disappear due to the rising sea levels, so tells the story, and the inhabitants will need to relocate. In the installation we hear the last recorded mating song of ò-ò bird, the last male of now extinct species, calling for a female in vain. The melody of a mating call for a reality that is no longer there reverberates and envelopes the island’s VR scene reminding us that its referent will soon be only the spectre of the past. The songs will remain, the images will remain as the silent vestiges of the past enouncing our planet’s inevitable future. And Cuna indigenous after the rise of the sea? Will they remain present only as separated from their cultural environment – only in historical documentation, as fascinating cultural ruins of the past (spectres) much in a manner the extinct species live in contemporary museums as fascinating natural ruins of a glorious, long lost biodiversity. Who will release their purbas from these documents, from the western commodified scientific, historical gaze?

Contemplating on Benjamin’s notion of technology Susan Buck-Morss wrote that “[t]echnology […] develops with a double function.” As it is at the same time extension of the human senses – a tool “increasing the acuity of perception, and forces the universe to open itself up to penetration by the human sensory apparatus” and an armour, “defensive insulation”, which exists “precisely because this technological extension leaves the senses open to exposure” and thus technology needs to “double back on the senses as protection in the form of illusion” (Buck-Morss 1992, 22).

Siegfried Kracauer defined film as Athena’s polished shield. In the Greek myth Athena gave Perseus a polished shield to help him slay the monstrous gorgon Medusa whose petrifying gaze turns people to stone. Perseus was able to confront the Medusa by viewing her reflection in the shield, avoiding her gaze, destroying her. It was through the reflection of reality, which enabled Perseus to confront the reality and destroy it.

Technology as a tool and a weapon extends human power at the same time intensifying the vulnerability of […] ‘the tiny, fragile human body’ and thereby produces a counter-need, to use technology as a protective shield against the ‘colder order’ that it creates. (Buck-Morss 1992, 33)

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Today the real of photography is a field in which billions of photographs linger, lives, reproduces themselves, flickers with the frequency of the digital screen, ornaments themselves with likes, comments and remarks, and constantly battles for the fleeting attention – which seem so fleeting that it seems that fort his »new«
photography one does not even need the »old« photographic attention – because it is being replaced by some other more profound, for some even ominous, attention of the eye of the apparatus of algorithms. Does it even matter nowadays how we as humans see and experience photographs? Is it the more pertinent question what does the Google see? Indeed, what do the “glasses” see? It seems as we would be looking through the transparent screen, as a “window to the world” (as was long the description of photography) whereas in fact we are looking at the screen – at the veil of transparency, shrouding the reality. If one would be able to go through the glasses – what kind of the world would one find there?

The movie Matrix reminded us that the illusory programme can be seen only through the glitches, the signs of the malfunctioning code. In the project Anonymous Gods by Marion Balac we can see the functioning of a facial software recognition programme that captures and translates the reality of a face into a physiognomic feature vectors. We can observe the glitches of a programme, see the “work of art” done by the algorithm (the blurring out the statues faces in Google Street View) – the visual capabilities and flaws of the “electronic eye”. Miha Godec's and Valeria Wolf Gang’s David's Gaze positions us in viewpoint of the renaissance Michelangelo's statue of David (in 3D printed replica of its head) to let us perceive the imaginary, yet not so distant, future interactive world where neural networks, virtual reality and interactivity reign. Where the boundaries between virtual and real body are becoming porous and harder and harder to discern. A glimpse into the world in which the differences between truth and false, reality and fiction, are structured along the virtual-actual divide. In Cuna medicinal practices the spectres are controlled by adequate representation. It seems as if the humankind strive towards creation of a perfect replica (perfect vison machine, perfect neural machine), echoes the magical desire of making an image into an object, virtual into actual, spectral into physical – and all that, it seems, in the image of man.

What kind of spectres, copies, and representation can one conjure up in contemporaneity to shield oneself against the dangerous spirits of enforced visibility, ominous reality of machine learning, automated data gathering, biometrical and data profiling, artificial neural networks – all in all the part of the spectral reality of photography apparatus? Is it possible to shield oneself against the phantasmagoria of the system that passivizes? Is there a wider curative aspect of contemporary art practices or do they belong to the same order as phantasmagorical? Since we cannot face the Real head-on that the strategies need to be two folded – resembling the strategies of camouflage – hiding the spectator against the Real in order to see and pierce the reality from the safe distance, askew, away from its the petrifying gaze.

Simon Manner’s Camouflage series (the snipers hiding in the photographs, our eye unable to discern their position) functions on several levels. It reminds us that becoming invisible means becoming one with the surrounding, that protection from perilous gazes arises from the process of de-individualisation, but at the same time it reminds us of our gaze’s innate desire to see, perceive, and discern – to individualise – not matter what lies in its field of vision. Isn’t precisely photography that medium which always “points” to something? Surely if there is a photograph, there should be something there? And if not? Should we imagine it? Name it? And lastly is there a difference? To take another cue from the magical rituals – It is the chanting (spelling out) that conjures into being that of which it is a chant. In Špela Škulj’s project Limbo, a spatial photography installation, we are reminded on how our own perception and point of view structures and shapes the perceived reality – we see how our relation and position alternates the objective world, forming it in front of our very eyes.

The Rabbit Hole projects simultaneously question the present-day reality and unveil the ways of its technological embeddedness while hinting on the possibilities of its future permutations. Are we really in contact with reality? Or are we left at the mercy of constant flickering and perpetually changing simulations, copies, and representations? Which one is the right one? But, truly, is this even the right question? The exhibition projects revolve around of the failed encounter of the reality and photography – on their descent into phantasmagorical landscapes of contemporary visibility and on the social consequences of the intoxication that this rapid descent brings. As a contemporary versions of the burnt images from the Cuna indigenous rituals they create an illusion and defend us against the “cold” petrifying, spectral order of technology – but then again – just maybe they only anesthetize us just before we crash into dystopian social reality.

The greatest trick that photography has pulled is to convince everybody that it has died. The lesson of Cuna image-burning ritual is that through the death of materiality of the image rises the spiritual, spectral power– magical power of the image. What is haunting the contemporaneity is the spectre of photography, which released from the shackles of its materiality is building contemporary phantasmagorical empiorium. Jeremy Bentham (the author of the perfect optical control and disciplinary apparatus – the panopticon machine) once remarked on why he is so utterly afraid of the vampires. Not because he would believe they exist – but precisely because he knows they do not.

References