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Fear Eats the Soul

Fear Eats the Soul

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TEXT PART

ABSTRACT

For my master thesis I present a video installation named *Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul*. The project aims to explore the tension created by performative disrupting of the complex relationship between humans and digital images. Contemporary modes of our (human) interaction with digital media challenge the divide between digital and “real.” The video and the installation deal with the potential of performative addressing of this divide through a fictional narrative, utilizing the formal characteristics of a digital camera (apparatus) as a gatekeeping instrument. In this documentation I elaborate on the theoretical and contextual foundations of the project and offer insight into the methods used in the production of the video – the central piece of the installation.

Keywords: video art, installation, digital image, moving image, narrative fiction

Jako svou diplomovou práci předkládám videoinstalaci s názvem *Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul*. V tomto projektu si kladu za cíl prozkoumat napětí vytvářené performativním narušováním komplexního vztahu mezi člověkem a digitálním obrazem. Současné způsoby naší (lidské) interakce s digitálními médii zpochybňují samotnou hranici mezi digitálním a „skutečným“. Video a instalace se zabývají potenciálem performativního řešení tohoto předělu prostřednictvím fiktivního narativu, využívajícího formální vlastnosti digitální kamery (aparátu) jako nástroje gatekeepingu. V této dokumentaci rozpracovávám teoretické a kontextuální základy projektu a nabízím vhled do metod používaných při výrobě videa – ústřední části instalace.

Klíčová slova: videoart, instalace, digitální obraz, pohyblivý obraz, narativní fikce

MOTIVATION, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Data, sounds, and images are now routinely transitioning beyond screens into a different state of matter.

Hito Steyerl, "Is The Internet Dead?"¹

We might be unplugged but that doesn't mean we're off the hook. The internet persists offline as a mode of life, surveillance, production, and organization – a form of intense voyeurism coupled with maximum non transparency.

Hito Steyerl, "Is The Internet Dead?"²

Imagine waking up one day to find personal digital technology³ crashed. You lost access to sensitive data, pictures, secret chats, memories, to-do lists, menstrual calendars, internet banking. Did you crash it yourself because you wanted to be part of the counterculture, which felt impossible to achieve while participating?⁴ Have you felt betrayed by what the social media platforms had to offer in return to what they took? Have you felt sold out by the media magnates, who sell your data and imprison you in the feedback loop of marketing? What now? Can you remember who/what you are?

Resigning ourselves to a reliance to technology leads us to neglect our already fractured senses⁵. Bodies become cyborgs without being penetrated, by using gadgets and apps to navigate the offline world we habitually call real. It is becoming increasingly difficult to be fully present in the "offline" world. Although we can trace the fracturing and changing of human perception back to the first "staged" realities⁶, this development ramped up with cinema and, most recently, the feasible interactiveness with the digital technologies. The activation of a human/digital relationship and the activation of perception⁷, through touch, screen technologies are undeniably significant in making the 'realness' of the online content more pervasive. For example, in the text for *e-flux journal* "The Code of Touch: Navigating

¹ Hito STEYERL, "Is The Internet Dead?" in *Duty Free Art, Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, p. 144, London: Verso Books, 2017.

² Ibid.

³ Personal technology is a category of devices and services used by a single person, for example: smart phone, computer, media production devices such as video camera. See: John SPACEY, "17 Examples of Personal Technology," *Simplicable*, 17 November 2019. <https://simplicable.com/en/personal-technology> (accessed 17 April 2022)

⁴ Caroline BUSTA, „The Internet Didn't Kill Counterculture You Just Won't Find it on Instagram“, *Document Journal*, 14. January 2021, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2021/01/the-internet-didnt-kill-counterculture-you-just-wont-find-it-on-instagram/> (accessed 17 April 2022)

⁵ Paul VIRILIO, *The Vision Machine*, London: British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, 1994.

⁶ For example writings about Ancient Greece paintings, in which grapes were so vivid, that people tried to pick them from the painting.

⁷ Opposite of previous passivity of spectators watching movies in cinemas.

Beyond Control, or, Towards Scalability and Sociability,” Doreen Mende, a German independent writer and theorist, writes:

“Since 2007, the touchscreen has become a popular display technology to zoom into a detail or set a focus on an image, to operate GPS maps or to order food via the phone. Hundreds of patented gestural movements for navigating, steering, and moving the image surface in real-time mark the scalability of the gaze by means of touch. These gestures have composed a sensory-motor vocabulary of the body, more specifically, of the finger’s tactile capacity that mobilizes the touchscreen interface as a display for becoming present within a world, yet without one’s own body.”⁸

Excess use of social media and digital technologies in everyday life allows us to traverse the reality between online and offline, on the tangible ‘portal’ of the touch screen, while fiction begins to fluctuate with vividness. Hito Steyerl, German artist, film maker and writer, describes how images started leaving their carriers, and *invading reality* in the essay “Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?” In her view, images affect the so-called material reality with direct political impact. As a consequence, Steyerl implies that it is no longer possible to understand reality without recognizing of the impact digital images have on the ‘real’. The threshold was broken, she claims, during the occupation of the national TV stations during the 1989 Romanian Revolution when protesters used the TV studio as a meeting place, a courtroom, and a means of communication, while broadcasting everything live. The digital traversing accelerated with the development of the Internet, which enabled more ‘transfer points.’

“But if images start pouring across screens and invading subject and object matter, the major and quite overlooked consequence is that reality now widely consists of images; or rather, of things, constellations, and processes formerly evident as images. This means one cannot understand reality without understanding cinema, photography, 3D modelling, animation, or other forms of moving or still image. The world is imbued with the shrapnel of former images, as well as images edited, photoshopped, cobbled together from spam and scrap. Reality itself is postproduced and scripted, affect rendered as after-effect. Far from being opposites across an unbridgeable chasm, image and world are in many cases just versions of each other. They are not equivalents however, but deficient, excessive, and uneven in relation to each other. And the gap between them gives way to speculation and intense anxiety.”⁹

As a consequence, it is increasingly difficult to feel alive without having an interaction on and with the digital or the Internet, since we are affected even without participation. This has escalated, so that the need to affirm being alive is satiated by watching fiction. The world is becoming a strange shell, a scenography, or a scene, in a constant state of waiting for something to happen or being conscious that it already might be happening but we’re not able to see it. This inspired me to explore creating something which has its own life inside of this weird shell of opportunity. Not only does the use of technology affect human

⁸Doreen MENDE, „The Code of Touch: Navigating Beyond Control, or, Towards Scalability and Sociability“, e-flux journal, Issue #109, May 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/109/331193/the-code-of-touch-navigating-beyond-control-or-towards-scalability-and-sociability/>, (accessed 17 April 2022)

⁹Hito STEYERL, “Is The Internet Dead?” in *Duty Free Art, Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War*, p. 148 , London: Verso Books, 2017.

perception, it enables diversification and makes it heavily machinic. This means that human contemporary vision depends on the use of applications such as Weather, Maps, Instagram, etc. Eye vision is boosted by filtering, decrypting, and pattern recognition but it is damaged by the constant close proximity of the screen.

It is not a one way bridge though, because we can recognize the digital camera as a tool that connects human perception and the digital invading the 'real' through image. The apparatus of the digital camera is a prototype – gatekeeper of the relationship between the human and the digital, as it enables the capturing of data from the 'real', introduces them to the digital sphere and consequently the online network of data. The digital camera opened the door to even a complicated computational process of capturing the 'real' with the development of smartphone cameras or smart digital cameras. The digital camera as an object - regardless if it is a component of a smartphone or with its own 'embodiment' - is a tool used, in this context, by humans, and through which they deliberately enable this process by taking pictures, being photographed or unintentionally by being surveilled and monitored. Apart from enabling this process, humans also actively participate in the creation of the digital world, for example by uploading their pictures to create new AI generated content through apps such as *Dream*.

The video *Orlando: Fear Eats The Soul* is directed as an exploration of tensions along the fluid borders which are being created, disrupted, misused and enabled by the effects of human/digital interaction. In the project I aim to explore the digital camera as a tool for agency gained through representation, as well as to delve into questions of authorship, representation, visibility and repression. As a tool, it enables us to create a stereotype or break it, to exclude, create proof, tear out of context, enable visibility, and distort meaning. I explore if it is possible to breach the mainstream highways of chasing meaning, clustered with rules and limitations of the common visual language we are urged to participate in. The approach to camera work which interests me is that which shakes off the boundaries and pressure of mainstream anthropocentric image grammar which enables further embedding and normalization of ideologies while using the alibi of representation.

In addition to the effects that technologies have on understanding the world we habitually call 'real', and the deepening of the interaction and politicizing of navigation on-screen through the 'post-Internet' world, I would like to mention a further development of human/digital interaction - *speculative reorganization of time*, as described by Armen Avanesian and Suhail Malik in *The Speculative Time-Complex* for the *DIS* magazine. This reorganization is present throughout the history of the moving image and I will come back to it later in the text.

NARRATIVE

“You are watching me, but I see you, and this is what I see.”
Shygirl interview for 032c¹⁰

Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul is a video that deals with the tension created by performative disruption of the human/digital relationship. The installation is composed of a clay sculpture on the floor – creating a kind of web, a broken mirror into which an anthropocentric figure with the head of a dinosaur is looking, and the video projection. The installation is an extension of one of the worlds presented inside the video; more precisely – a space created by a *gaze trap*.

Gaze trap is a notion that explores how the gaze constructs a meaning for a certain subject which is being recorded and which encapsulates this meaning through a permanent ‘reading’. Ryan Trecartin, an American artist, during his lecture at the *PAF festival* in Spring 2022 described how, in the case of his approach, language can do a similar thing to the subject of a film. The gaze trap understands the camera as a tool which writes an image – a carrier of a permanent ‘reading.’ It keeps the reading visible, but unable to change, because it lasts only until the video ends. The time gateway defines the image’s agency with a beginning and an end.

The narrative of the video consists of a fictional story about a group of people who decided to abandon the Internet and break away from their identities being constructed. We aren’t told the exact reason – maybe it is a revolt against censorship, maybe growing environmental consciousness. But it is clear that they want to leave the situation of forced data extraction. The group develops an application which enables users to download and delete all of the data connected to them from the internet. The video follows three characters (one of them having two roles): Fear, Orlando/Lizzard, Methods. Fear wears a mask and seems like an entity from another world but we don’t know for sure what he is. His name suggests his identity as a manifestation of the entity of fear. Fear and Orlando are part of this group and decide to use the application. Methods is not part of the group, and she owns a digital camera herself, believing that it is a threat to her. Methods decides to hide her camera, as she is afraid that she could be prosecuted for owning it. She carries the camera in different plastic bags, every day from one place to another. By accident she leaves the camera in Fear’s hiding place, who steals it and brings it to Orlando. When Orlando and Fear ‘left’ the Internet, they realized they forgot to prepare for it beforehand. This left them in a state of confusion because their perception had been under the influence of diverse perceptive and navigating tools. Their vision is blurred, and at one point Orlando says: ‘Everyone fell more into the background. Soft as a memory, soft as a wound.’ Losing access to data made Orlando unsure about their identity. Finding the camera made them feel safe, as it is a tool he already used. Orlando thought that by filming themselves, they could re-establish agency by creating new, uncontrolled images.

¹⁰ Khalif JONES, METAGAZE: SHYGIRL Stares Back, *032 magazine*, 20 July 2021, <https://032c.com/magazine/metagaze-shygirl-stares-back> (accessed 17 April 2022)

The structure of the video acknowledges and is inspired by the reorganization of time concept¹¹ which is an idea of Armen Avanesian, Austrian philosopher, and Suhail Malik, British writer and teacher of critical studies. The authors claim that time has changed directions, and is no longer linear because the scale of social organization today, is no longer based on human agents but on systems, infrastructures and networks.

“Complex societies—which means more than-human societies at scales of sociotechnical organization that surpass phenomenological determination—are those in which the past, the present, and the future enter into an economy where maybe none of these modes is primary, or where the future replaces the present as the lead structuring aspect of time.”¹² In the text they elaborate on how this social organization today affects the understanding of time. ‘If the speculative is a name for the relationship to the future, the “post-” is a way in which we recognize the present itself to be speculative in relation to the past.’¹³

The video *Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul* is structured around different levels of narration approaches; shots are from first person, pov, vlogging and surveillance perspectives. One of the characters is caught in a loop inside of liminal spaces, which acknowledges the complexity of the character’s situation in relation to technology. The structure of the image overlaps narration styles from different layers of the technosphere and instructed vision. The narrative ends with Fear and Orlando breaking into my room, to steal my passport. Because it is an only left biotype image of Orlando they decide to burn it, believing it will free him from the instructed image.

PRODUCTION APPROACH

When I began writing the scenario for the video, I started from these questions: Is it possible to create or perceive a video without objectifying reality? Does the character, who holds the camera or is filming from their own perspective, become unleashed from the gaze trap? Does this character become a mannequin for creating further stereotypes?

When explaining his most recent ongoing project *Whether Line*, Ryan Trecartin talked about the characters being stuck – they became *sites* by being institutionalized through language. In the project *Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul*, I work with the similar notion of characters being stuck: they are ‘preserved’ by the camera, and one of them, Orlando, gets quite literally caught in the camera and becomes a character wearing a dinosaur mask. This is imaged as Orlando being caught in a liminal space, trying to get out.

¹¹Armen AVANESSIAN – Suhail MALIK, “The Speculative Time Complex”, DIS magazine, 12 March 2016., <https://dismagazine.com/blog/81218/the-speculative-time-complex-armen-avanessian-suhail-malik/> (accessed 17 April 2022)

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Although using the camera seems a little too obvious, as we can follow the extensive development of technologies and their use in recent years, I decided to focus on the digital camera, because it is a kind of prototype of a tool which traps the meaning, or creates a trap for the ones using it. When I started writing the scenario, I dwelled on authorship. When we create something, we set up a certain cultural coded reading of the piece we created. This means that the reading stays preserved in a certain state until our work exists and appears somewhere, at an exhibition, or on a platform, together with its annotation. It is being read through the visual language of the culture where it takes place. Can we reopen the meaning by reconsidering the context where it takes place? Apart from an interest in the topic of emancipation, this question caused me to wonder if it is possible to create a character that can exercise its own 'free will', at least inside of the world of the video. There is an immediate connection to fears of AI going wild and taking over the world. Would it be possible to create a fictional world inside which these characters, have possibility and responsibility – agency - while not being modelled or manipulated into it by the author and the visual narrative context of the cultures they take place in? Is this a question of free will? Is there the possibility of different dimensions, to which we open doors to different worlds through video - digital image wormholes?

In "Broken symmetries: Memory, sight, love", American feminist scholar, Peggy Phelan writes that "In framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other. Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The excess meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible."¹⁴

CONTEXTUALIZATION

In this section I describe several examples of contemporary art pieces which inspired my project. As mentioned before, I'm interested in exploration of topics such as human digital interaction, its challenges and consequences which are also influencing contemporary art production. These projects were interesting to me because of the production approach, editing and structuring work, narrative, scenography and sound editing.

Rachel MacLean, Scottish multimedia artist's film *Feed me (2015)*, shown at the National Gallery in Prague as part of *Digital Intimacy*, a show curated by Michal Novotný portrays a bizarre, yet familiar fictional environment in which she played all the characters. The film's structure is chaotic, as it jumps between different media realities such as: online chatting, surveillance, advertisement, corporate environment, trapping a group of children who are not acting according to social norms and the expectations of the society. MacLean's

¹⁴ PHELAN Peggy, „Broken symmetries: Memory, sight, love“, in *The Feminist and Visual Culture Reader*, p.118-127.

video also jumps between perspectives of the 'good' and the 'bad' erupting in a revolution against the tyrannical corporates.¹⁵

In her 2019 video *Buyer Walker Rover (Yiwu) Aka*, Argentinian artist Amalia Ulman, explores and subverts the nature of two mediums – a private phone call and a seemingly public selfie-stick vlogger style of filming. “Through selfie app-filtered videos and confessions, made using readily available domestic technologies, we learn about the protagonist Ana, who is a tankie nerdish fan of the Heavy Metal band Extremoduro.”¹⁶

American artists Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch, have been dealing with number of recurring themes throughout their films¹⁷, such as: identity as roleplay, the struggle between individual expression and communal belonging, family politics, queer culture, globalisation - and even more mundane things like house parties, make-up, TV static, and poster paint. Trecartin's approach cannot fit within a single category, as each movie is packed with numerous interwoven concepts and uses networks of layered references.

In his video from 2020, Daniel Rajmon explores the troubles and consequences of a person who has a neuralink implant. *Neuraplay*¹⁸ uses different modes of narration, including news broadcast, filming of the film crew, and placing the videos found on a hidden USB stick. The character who hides the USB mysteriously dies without leaving a message, which keeps us asking ourselves, did he die because his neuralink got hacked? The video explores the dangers from disruptions of a technological object connected directly with the brain.

The film, *Everything But the World*, screened at the DIS magazine's latest exhibition at Vienna Secession *On how to become a fossil*¹⁹, is a multi-genre docu-sci-fi that flows in different forms and formats, referencing formats from Youtube tutorials to documentary. The film is conceived as a TV pilot exploring the creation of new narratives for new histories, departing from the 'nature show' to explore the human.

Slides is a short film by Martin Kohout, a Czech artist dealing with issues of 'nocturnal labour, sleeping patterns, algorithms, daily use of technology and our sensual and mental response trying to cope with it.'²⁰ Communication between the two main characters relies on apps, enabling them to stay connected without physical contact. Kohout collaborates with artists, academics, nocturnal workers and union representatives to come together, to engage and to exchange their experiences and knowledge through the production of the film.

¹⁵ Michal Novotny, „Post-Digital Intimacy“, exhibition guide, National Gallery Prague, 11. November. 2021 <https://ngp-prod.brainz.cz/storage/4231/Post-digital-intimacy-%7C-Exhibition-Guide.pdf> (accessed 17 April 2022)

¹⁶ Amalia ULMAN, „Buyer Walker Rover YIWU aka there then“, video, 15:18 min, *amaliaulmam.eu*, <https://www.youtube.com/embed/ATbDN5ErGgA>, (accessed 17. April 2022).

¹⁷ <https://vimeo.com/trecartin>

¹⁸ Daniel RAJMON, „Neura play“, video, 8:45 min, *YouTube*, uploaded by user Daniel 25. November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZdTW58oBes> (accessed 17. April 2022).

¹⁹ <https://www.secession.at/en/exhibition/d-i-s/>

²⁰ Martin KOHOUT, „Slides“, video, 22:51, *martinkohout.com/slides*, <https://youtu.be/novWDGJjVoM> (accessed 17. April 2022).

Since the gateways of the human/digital relationship are open and continue to change the world as we know it, video art creates an opportunity to explore these changes and challenges while utilizing and pointing out the problematic features of new technologies. The video *Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul* explores the notions of confusion, and being pressured to find your own place in the habitual dichotomy.

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Orlando: *Fear Eats the Soul*, 00:10 min, still from the video



Orlando: *Fear Eats the Soul*, 29:09 min, still from the video



Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul, 01:01 min, still from the video



Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul, 02:53 min, still from the video



Orlando: *Fear Eats the Soul*, 03:40 min, still from the video



Orlando: *Fear Eats the Soul*, 03:50 min, still from the video



Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul, 05:58 min, still from the video



Orlando: Fear Eats the Soul, 9:12 min, still from the video



Orlando: *Fear Eats the Soul*, 11:43 min, still from the video



Orlando: *Fear Eats the Soul*, 12:11 min, still from the video