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Digital
Abstractions
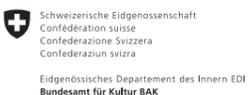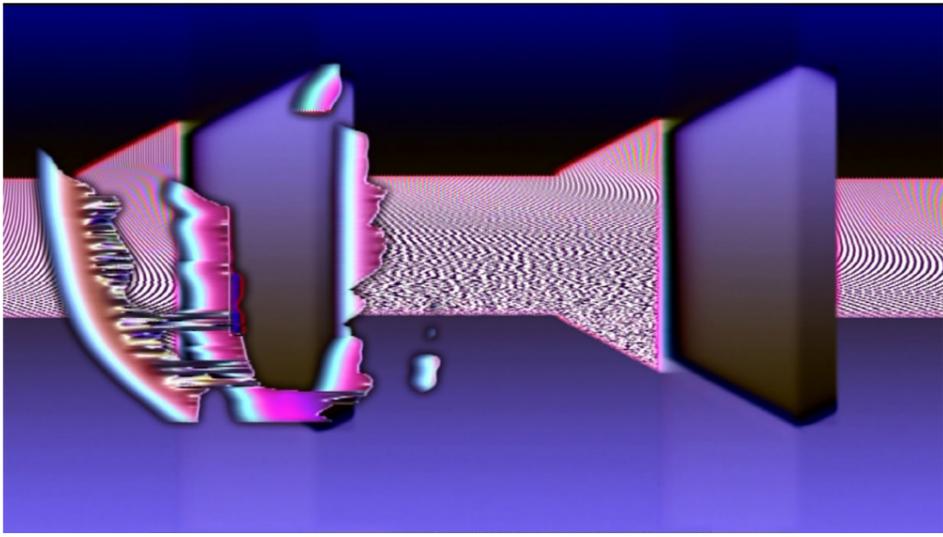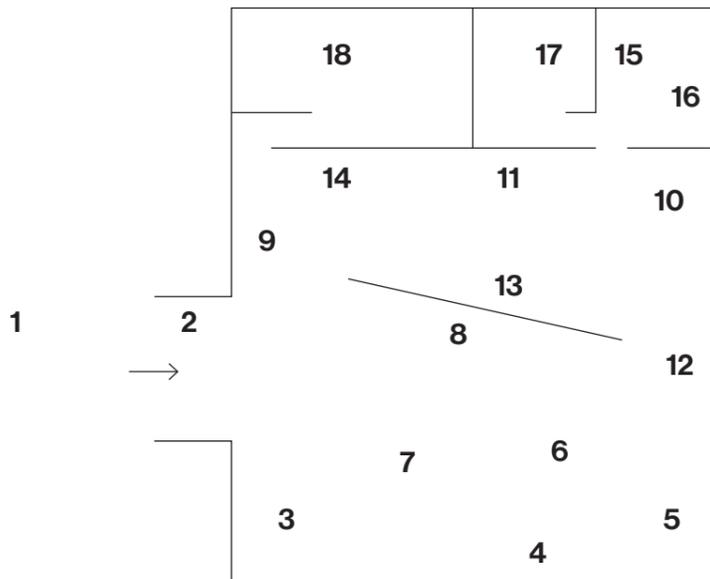07.04. - 22.05.2016

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Digital Abstractions

Sabrina Ratté, Visites Possibles, Screenshot, 2014

Digitale Abstraktionen
07.04. - 22.05.2016

Complex digital structures surround us in our everyday life. We stare at monitors and displays everywhere and all the time. Digital images, sounds, and noises seem to dominate our perceptions today and influence our social behavior.
Yet the logic behind computer systems and the way they work is becoming less important and more difficult to comprehend. The complex structures and mechanisms of the digital disappear behind smooth screens that apparently seamlessly expand our physical world into the virtual realm.
The exhibition poses questions about our digital world's aesthetic potential and probes behind the surfaces of monitors and displays. The claim of 20th-century abstract art to be autonomous, which involved going beyond mere depiction of the world, no longer has any validity today. By reflecting our technological, digitized world, the new, programmed, abstract pictorial worlds no longer signify only themselves, but also refer to the underlying logics and structures of a reality generated by computers.

The exhibition's artistic positions focus on the topic of the abstract, taking the most diverse approaches: They create animated, programmed architectures that question the impacts of digital technologies on our understanding of space as well as the opening of new pictorial worlds. Other audiovisual works play with the aesthetics of computer-generated realities and render the processes inherent in them visible through mistakes and breakdowns. They create sensory compositions and immersive spaces for experiential spaces in large-format projections, interactive installations, two- and three-dimensional forms of images, objects, and video clips. Visitors in turn are invited by artistic Apps to generate their own abstractions.

1 In *Dots 4*, **Gysin & Vanetti** (CH) use a mechanical switchboard, previously used as a display on a bus, to show their abstractions. They reprogram the dot matrix, which originally served to announce public transportation lines and place names, into abstract forms and sound patterns. *Dots 4* thematizes the dot as the simplest symbol and most elementary form. Because of the reprogramming, it is no longer possible for viewers to read any content in the symbols; instead, the symbolic in our everyday lives is shifted to the foreground by the abstract composition of sounds and geometric shapes. Reinterpretation of reality is also the topic of the following works, whereby the focus here is on the aspect of perceiving space and opening up new digital pictorial spaces.

2 In *Here and Now* by **Karin Lustberger** (CH), two artificial hands hover above the visitors' heads and use wireless cameras to surveil the space below. In the process, they make peculiar movements whose goal and function cannot be ascertained. Instead of a projection of an image of the room, a garish, distorted image flashes across the wall with beeps and whooshes. It is not the transmission of recorded reality that is highlighted, but rather the source of the image and thus the apparatus of the camera. Lustenberger translates the machine-generated image into a fabric of images and sounds that can be perceived abstractly by intentionally creating disturbances.

3 In *Earth*, **Esther Hunziker** (CH) examines the program Google Earth. The existing data, which leads users to believe in a spatial simulation of the world, serves as a pool in which the artist discovers abstract and displaced shapes and exposes technologically defined spaces. Simulated reality proves to be a constructed, technically programmed structure that develops its own aesthetic potential by creatively shifting perspective.

4 *Untitled* by **Alexandra Navratil** (CH) leads observers through empty, white, abstract interior spaces reminiscent of impersonal waiting areas in commercial buildings, airports, or malls. The images appear futuristic and simultaneously have an uncanny aura, since there are no traces of human life. Navratil's abstract world pays grotesque homage to the fetishism of belief in progress through increasing digitization that permeates our lives.

5 In *Visites Possibles*, **Sabrina Ratté** (CAN) also generates digital spaces whose architectural character is inspired by real architectures and landscapes. She transforms and alienates photos and videos she has made to such a degree that abstract electronic forms or new digital realities emerge from them. Combined with a hypnotic sound composition, the images develop a maelstrom that has observers plunge into the abstract world of images with their senses.

The political aspect of digital alienation is thematized by the work *Facial Weaponization Suite: Fag Face Mask* by **Zach Blas** (USA). His pink mask combines the data of 45 men to form a single face, making facial recognition and thus also evaluation and use of the data involved impossible. The mask becomes a means of protest, as it does not hide or adapt one's own identity, but instead proclaims a message of diversity.

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7 The abstract moving images in *Lost Hours* by **Nicolas Sassoon** (FR) reflect formal rigor; he translates the mood of light on water surfaces at various times of day into digital patterns and colors. His digital animations move between the aesthetics of older computer games with a small number of pixels and the organic appearance of structures of fabric. *Lost Hours* is part of the series *patterns*, which works through potentially infinite algorithmic movements and variations of form.

8 In *Abstract Browsing* Weavings, **Rafael Rozendaal** (NL) plays with our customary ways of perceiving things in our every digital lives. A Google Chrome plug-in he programmed transforms all the websites visited into colorful, abstract images, whereby the underlying infrastructure of the websites serves as a compositional concept for the abstract image. The program determines the arrangement and selection of the shapes and colors; thus, everyone can create abstract art simply in their normal use of the Internet. Rozendaal had the most beautiful compositions produced as tapestries using the Jacquard weaving technique, which is based on punchcards.

Visualization of abstract data is the topic of the two following works:

9 *Between Biological and Digital Identity* by **Lazar Jeremic** (CH) is comprised of datasets describing his biological identity, the identity of his computer, and the patterns of his digital behavior. In the visual interpretation of the data, every individual pixel corresponds to one character, one calendar entry, or one system file. With the pixels color-code according to their functions, abstract images emerge, referring to digital and biological identity.

10 **Elisabeth Ritschard** (CH) also visualizes data in *Parametermodulationen*. She programs mathematical functions and animates a diameter to ever-changing variations of movement. The repertoire of forms, of shrinking, expanding, unchanging, vibrating, or disappearing circles refers to universal questions about the impacts of movement. Employing scientific precision, Ritschard examines the nature of artificial, programmed moving images, reducing them to their basic forms, and posing the question about their impacts on our senses.

Structures, algorithmic systems, and technological developments are taken up by the artist collective **LAb[au]** (BEL). In *OrigamiPenrose*, they refer to the mathematical examination of patterns and surfaces. Arranged by geometric shapes, and using kinetic papers set in motion electronically, they explore binary structures oscillating between hot and cold, color or no color, moving and unmoving, and two- and three-dimensional conditions. Nonetheless, associations to nature and the structures of organic life emerge in the rigorous algorithmic logic.

11

The two following works focus on references to art history.

12 In *The [3D] Great Day of his Wrath*, **Pier Giorgio de Pinto** (CH) selects a historic painting as the starting point for his GIF animation. The eponymous painting by John Martin (1851-1853) recounts the story of the destruction of Babylon by a natural disaster, referring to the period of London's ascent to a major industrial city and the consequences of technological development. As the title indicates, De Pinto sets the two-dimensional image in motion and expands the image of the apocalypse over time by means of the three-dimensionality thus achieved. The abstract composition translates the original content into a symbolic universal metaphor of the power of nature over humanity.

13 In *Topologies*, **Quayola** (IT) digitally explores the pictorial compositions of classical paintings by Velazquez (Las Meninas, 1656) and Tiepolo (Immacolata Concezione, 1733). Using software, he transforms his original material into flowing, rhythmic animations. Hybrid spaces that seem to exist between painting, sculpture, and film emerge from images and sound. In the end, the abstract structures display no direct reference to the original image. Quayola updates classical aesthetics and the fascination of historical art works using digital means.

14 The work by **Femke Herregraven** (NL), in turn, is politically motivated. In *Precarious Marathon*, four digital characters are each represented by a monitor and a loudspeaker. They are based on chatbots, text-based dialogue systems that are fed by databases. The fictitious characters of the chatbots are a sleepless artist, an art critic, a high-frequency trader, and a moderator. The conversation between them, consisting of images and sounds, can continue endlessly because of its digital nature. Herregraven creates an abstract fiction that illustrates the abstract links between art and business through its technical production. In this fiction, the gallery owner already has been replaced by the high-frequency trader.

15 The work *TXT2IMG* by **Ted Davis** (USA/ CH) is dedicated to pictorial spaces; it is a program that generates glitch images from text messages. By sending a text message to the artist's number (+41 (0) 76 226 3336), the visitor activates the work, and an abstract image is made visible. Writing becomes an algorithmic data source that is interpreted as an image. Within the framework of the rules programmed by the artist, visitors can experiment and fill the room with patterns of color. At night, *TXT2IMG* is also to be seen at Café Frühling in Kleinbasel.

16 Animator **Cyriak** (GB) is dedicated to popular culture; in his video clips like *Cows Cows Cows*, he uses images available on the Internet as material for his ornamental alienations of images. He manipulates images of cows to create absurd, surreal compositions accompanied by mesmerizing music reminiscent of arcade machines and emphasizing, on another level, playful access and the joy of manipulating and designing.

The last two works of the exhibition enable visitors to plunge into sensuous pictorial worlds. The

17 Studio **Zeitguised** (DE) works between design and art and is known for its colorful, liquid, abstract animations. *Comme des Organismes* refers to the design vocabulary of the spring collection of the fashion label 'Comme des Garçons' and transforms it into colorful organic structures whose sounds evoke microscopic dwellers of the textile material. In the music video *Till It's Gone*, mathematically geometric shapes encounter the programmed music of Steve Bug. Abstract forms become tangible in the music video *Creme Theme* by 'Mouse on Mars'; color and light effects provoke the limits of human perception.

18 **Rainer Kohlberger** (AT) focuses on experiencing digital sound and image structures physically in his work. *Never Comes Tomorrow* stages the algorithmic way in which computers function in a space-consuming immersive audiovisual composition. The work confronts the viewer with digital noise and electronic interference. Kohlberger imitates these effects, which are usually perceived as mistakes, through intentional programming. In the abstract production process, he causes lines and shapes to oscillate, making the algorithmic way of functioning physically palpable. His abstraction mirrors the aesthetics of our digital society, where even apparent quiet is filled with noise.