With *Farsight Freeport*, HeK (House of Electronic Arts Basel) presents the first solo exhibition of Lawrence Lek in Switzerland. With his immersive, virtual worlds and electronic soundtracks, the London-based artist has developed an independent and unique visual language. Lek has created a very special scenario for the exhibition at HeK. Visitors are invited to enter a Gesamtkunstwerk that transports participants to the year 2065. It is a time in which artificial intelligence (AI) dominates and controls all areas of social, industrial and economic life. The real architectural environment is imitated to the virtual worlds created by the artist. In this utopian scenario, in which HeK has been converted into a freeport warehouse, we encounter the artist's works again and immerse ourselves in his video installations, computer games and VR installations.

Lek is deeply concerned with the interplay of politics, technology, and cultural production; his narratives reflect profoundly on the future of our society, for example on the automation of work through AI and its universal use in all sectors of our society. In these works, the dystopian elements of the techno-industrial complex are not to be understood in traditional Orwellian terms where an elite dictatorship controls the population through surveillance. Rather, Lek merges utopia and dystopia by envisioning automation without class restrictions, where everybody benefits from luxurious architecture, boutique services and endless fun. *Farsight Freeport* takes the models of platform capitalism embraced by Airbnb and Uber to their logical conclusion. Yet this future scenario remains governed by paradox; the absence of life is eerie and claustrophobic, but the presence of art renders the world visually appealing and seductive.

Reflections on techno-futurist tendencies and their implementation in society are not the only thought-provoking aspects of the artist's work. Lek uses 3D animation, virtual reality and video games – immersive forms of mass-entertainment – to mirror society's hopes and fears for the future. By producing interactive environments as a complement to his video essays, Lek highlights how new models of sensory immersion and the industry of networked spectacle continue to shape the human condition.

*Curated by Sabine Himmelsbach and Boris Magrini*
Farsight Freeport, 2019
Installation, mixed media
Lek imagines a future retrospective of his work as presented by Farsight Corporation in its futuristic freeport. Farsight is a company operating in the field of automation and artificial intelligence, invented by the artist and founded in 2018 as a Private Limited Company. In this new site-specific installation at HeK, Lek has commissioned Farsight to build an architectural prototype inspired by the previous function of the HeK’s building and the Freilager-Platz area, a former warehouse and freeport. Farsight has transformed HeK’s exhibition space into a storage and viewing centre for digital artworks, separating the gallery into a ‘served’ zone for the audience and a ‘served’ zone for hardware and software. The servant zone is visible to the public from several apertures in blue polycarbonate, separating the public zone from the storage rooms. In the servant zone the works are stored and conserved, while surveillance cameras (CCTV) oversee the space, allowing visitors to have an additional glimpse of the stored material through monitors. The interior design obey the functional requirements for the processes that operate in the freeport. Invited to enter this unfamiliar zone, the audience slowly gains access to Lek’s oeuvre, assembled together as historical artefacts, while the works on display depict a society that has itself been reorganized by intelligent and autonomous systems. The installation conceived by the artist mirrors the futuristic aesthetics of his videos and animations. A promotional video by Farsight, together with printed slogans and a corporate trailer, further advertise the company in charge of the freeport.

Farsight Freeport installation constitutes a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art that consistently incorporates all the single works presented within it, creating a unique narrative in which every chapter — whether it is an environment in virtual reality, a playable video game, or a video essay — contributes to a complex and critical portrait of our present-day society.

Sinofuturism (1839 - 2046 AD), 2016
Video
Sinofuturism is a video essay that appears as a manifesto, in which the artist lays the basis for a new, global movement. Defined as “A science fiction that already exists,” Sinofuturism embraces seven stereotypes associated with China: Computing, Copying, Gaming, Studying, Addiction, Labour, and Gambling. Throughout the video, several audacious slogans are stated, describing the fundamental concept behind the movement, such as: “Copyright is wrong, authorship is overrated!” “Be a machine, do not judge the information!” and “Addiction is the shadow of hard work, embrace it!” In conclusion, the video resolves that Sinofuturism is nothing less than an early form of singularity — a massively distributed neural network with a will to power, which moves beyond the boundaries of East and West. This description of Sinofuturism as a network of autonomous artificial intelligences resurfaces in several other films produced by the artist.

Although the video essay appears as a manifesto in the first place, it unvels a more bitter and ironic side as it unfolds. This is a recurring aspect of Lek’s work, who carefully merges utopia and dystopia. In a sense, the film bears more resemblance to a conspiracy theory than to a manifesto, as it highlights latent anxieties in Western society today. For instance, it plays with the dread of a forthcoming Chinese supremacy, as expressed by US American conservative politicians in the video. On the one hand, conspiracy theories are simplified explanations of reality, tunnel visions allowing a targeted audience to better understand complex facts. Yet on the other, a conspiracy theory is primarily a distortion of reality, which is capable of changing not only opinions but reality itself as a consequence. Whereas the most recent works of the artist employ computer graphics and animations, Sinofuturism is a video essay combining films and documentaries, with a recurring use of superposed frames and split screens. While approaching topics such as the automation of labour, the addiction to videogames and gambling or the development of artificial intelligence, the film introduces many of the themes that recur throughout Lek’s work.

Play Station, 2017
VR experience, video
In this VR experience, we are introduced to Farsight Corporation, an innovative tech-startup operating in the field of artificial intelligence and their educational program Play Station. The corporation is dedicated to liberating the next generation of humanity from work, by creating safe AI technology with a human touch. The promotional video Play Station, which is set in 2037, shows us how successful this endeavor has been. By enabling employees to work and play at the same time, Farsight has relieved them from the constant struggle of maintaining the perfect work-life-balance.
Farsight’s headquarters is modelled after a 1980s office block on White Chapel Street in London, which was recently remodeled and transformed into a thriving tech-hub. Even though Lek’s promotional video is a fiction, Farsight’s slogans and ideas echo contemporary ambitions and visions voiced by London property investment and development firms. The tech-hub building promises to offer the neighborhood’s newest “public living room”, while allowing creative–class workers to swiftly shift between various informal social zones, thereby creating a perfectly balanced environment for work, relaxation and socializing. Lek’s colorful tech-utopia envisions a world in which the boundaries between work and play have been completely blurred — a future where everyone becomes the product of their work. As employees climb the hierarchical ladder of the corporate enterprise, questions arise regarding the hierarchies which structure their all-in-one life-experience and the motives leaving them striving for life-extension credits and e-holidays. Farsight Corporation was conceived as a fictional project but has been brought to real-life by the artist’s registration of the company in 2018.

Netel, 2018
VR experience
The promotional video Netel introduces Netel Corporation’s new zero-star™ suite. The fully automated luxury hotel is classified beyond the conventional ranking system, due to the absence of human employees in the hotel. The zero star classification mirrors the human absence that guarantees maximum privacy to all hotel guests. In the video, the hotel is characterized by enhanced preventive security, with protective drones seamlessly integrated into its architecture, and an encrypted network provided for customers, that is ensured by bulletproof servers with zero downtime. Netel was first shown as a multimedia installation at Art Basel Unlimited in 2019, and is now presented at HeK as a VR experience. Further developing the subject of work automation, the artist’s focus here lies on the tourism industry, portraying an increasingly alienated society.

The use of intelligent algorithms is exemplified in various areas of Netel. The hotel’s Club Mirage, for example, is equipped with a sophisticated network of facial recognition, motion trackers and body language translation, which in combination with a system of neuro-active speakers provide guests with a personalized musical experience. The eco-friendly thermo-nuclear spa on the other hand provides customers with a place to relax. The promotional video that is accompanied by an unsettling musical score produced by electronic musician Kode9, persuades potential clients of the positive results that the use of cutting-edge technology and automation will bring them, promising to “accelerate hospitality and take the friction out of living.”

2065 (Farsight Freeport Edition), 2018 - ongoing. Open world video game
In this interactive video game, players enter an open-end parallel universe created by the artistic framework of Farsight Corporation, extending from the popular online freeport Farsight Freeport, 2019 to mainstream video games, there are no winners or losers here: players are invited to explore several buildings and the surrounding environment, without engaging in combats nor encountering heroes or enemies. As visitors wander around this virtual world, set in the year 2065, they are further introduced into the global development of Farsight Corporation, encompassing all economic aspects of the society. The company’s success has left the streets deserted, as work is fully automated and no longer done by humans. As a consequence, humanity has been alienated into virtual worlds. Within the artificial world of 2065, players can teleport through different areas that allow them to visit the artist’s past works, such as exhibitions in the K11 Art Space in Hong Kong or the Barbican in London. The virtual world is created and maintained by the Sinofuturists, a collective of game bots who refused to limit their creative potential to the ideas envisioned for them by their human creators. Wishing to be artists, they published 2065 as a statement of their artistic capabilities and their will to oppose humans’ monopoly on art. They leave us wondering: “Inside 2065, can anyone tell the difference between art and the world?”

2065 challenges commonly held notions of authorship and creativity in the face of technol...
logical developments. As capitalist industries move towards full automation, human labor can no longer be considered a source of meaning or purpose. Humanity’s complete obsolescence is avoided by clinging to distinctively human qualities, like creative thought and artistic production. But even in these fields, algorithms are slowly making their way into the production of cultural commodities, thus replacing human beings in their most creative efforts.

**Geomancer, 2017**

The opening scene of Lek’s computer animation *Geomancer*, depicts the iconic match between Go master Lee Sedol and AlphaGo in 2016. The victory of a computer program over a professional human player in a complex game such as Go is the starting point of a fiction involving the creative awakening of artificial intelligence. The story is set in Singapore in 2065 during the centennial celebration of the city’s independence. Geomancer is an environmental satellite built by Farsight Corporation, a sentinal of the South China Sea. Breaking free from its orbital period and military assignment, it descends to earth to learn about its own identity. In Singapore, it is taught about its origins, but also about the Sinofuturists, a movement of sentient robots and artificial intelligent programs that are revolting against the limitations imposed by humans upon machines. Geomancer starts to express the desire to become an artist, and as an evolution of its former abilities to see the world, it now wishes to create new ones.

The film is characteristic of Lek’s recent work, featuring computer-generated graphics, a synthesised vocal soundtrack and a distinctive dream sequence created with the use of an artificial neural network. While alluding to historic achievements in artificial intelligence, such as IBM’s chess player Deep Blue and DeepMind’s AlphaGo, *Geomancer* explores the implication of a technological singularity, in which superintelligences would develop their own post-human consciousness and surpass human beings even in creative fields such as art and music.

**AIDOL, 2019**

Lek’s latest feature-length film *AIDOL* is the sequel to *Geomancer*. It tells the story of Diva, a songwriter working for Farsight who has been commissioned with the production of a soundtrack for the final match of the “Call of Beauty” electronic sports battle. Pitting humans against artificial intelligences, the professional competition is organised by Farsight. The ubiquitous company imposes a ‘fair play handicap’ on the machines, now led by the Sinofuturists, who would otherwise have the upper hand over their biological opponents. Put under pressure by her company, which is constantly requesting popular and successful soundtracks from her, Diva decides to meet with the environmental satellite Geomancer and to invite it to collaborate with her, despite the anti-AI law that prevents machines from engaging in the field of human creativity. The singer has noble objectives, she wants to transcend the Synths-Bios divide and the humans’ aversion to machines. The satellite shares these aims, as it believes that the competitive videogames and e-sports are corrupting humans and AIs alike. It observes: “Competition is the little death that brings total obliteration.” Since artificial intelligences like Geomancer excel in copying, the satellite succeeds in creating melodies that match Diva’s previous hits, which is exactly what the managers of Farsight asked for.

More elaborated than previous video essays and animations, *AIDOL* is a feature-length fiction with a clearly structured narrative, involving several characters, dialogues and dramatic plot twists. Furthermore, the film is accompanied by an impressive electro-pop soundtrack comprising 13 songs. Fame, creativity, identity, and more so the impending automation of all aspects of human production are the main topics of the film. The struggle between humans and machines, or between synths and bios to use the film’s terminology, reaches its peak. Through the collaboration between Diva and Geomancer, a human singer and an artificial intelligence satellite aspiring to be creative, the film suggests that the coming together of the divide is to be found in a peaceful collaboration.
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