Emmanuel Van der Auwera: Seeing is Revealing
14.05. – 07.08.2022

House of Electronic Arts
Seeing is Revealing – as uncovering something that is underlying – is a maxim that unfolds throughout Emmanuel Van der Auwera’s oeuvre. An attentive observer of our time, the Belgian artist approaches current events and themes through their imagery, revealing the deeper implications of their content and dissemination. His first solo exhibition in Switzerland invites us to encounter his impressive visual worlds, which challenge our perceptions and deepen our understanding of images’ technically constructed quality and distribution through the media.

Van der Auwera’s expansive video installations explore questions evolving around perception – from the mediated experience of a world seen through the smartphone to the images generated by intelligent machines. With a formal rigour and reduction to the essential, he dissects and analyses the meaning of images – the role images play in depicting realities as well as in constructing them. His material is culled from the incessant stream of global screen culture as well as generated via new technologies and artificial intelligence, which the artist re-sorts and deconstructs, laying bare its meaning and poetically condensing its essence. The impressive image tableaus Van der Auwera creates, open the door to underlying socio-critical questions, rendering them sensually accessible in a fascinating and striking way.

The screen itself becomes material in Van der Auwera’s video sculptures, and here, too, he is interested in revealing how the technical device works. Almost a decade ago, Van der Auwera began manipulating LCD screens, cutting up their polarising filters. Eventually, he removed them altogether, exposing their underlying mechanics.

These works hinge on highly publicised current events, and illuminate the tragedies, tendencies and taboos of our media-infested world. The material Van der Auwera departs from is not only collected from streaming platforms, but also news channels and commercial providers’ image databases. His visual archive reveals their constructed reality, which he accentuates by highlighting the relationship between fact and fiction. Driven by the pursuit of “collective human experience”, the artist addresses fundamental issues of today’s world, ranging from the expansion of the surveillance state to simulated realities and deepfakes.

Emmanuel Van der Auwera: Seeing is Revealing – the artist’s first solo exhibition in Switzerland – offers a representative overview of the artist’s work and presents three new works created for the installation at HEK. The exhibition and the supporting programme are supported by Vidi-Square, Mindspaces (a S+T+ARTS Lighthouse project), Harlan Levey Projects, the Volkart Foundation and the BLKB Foundation for Culture and Education.

Curator: Sabine Himmelsbach
The Sky Is on Fire, 2019

The Sky Is on Fire is a large-scale, 3-channel LED video installation. A slow, constant camera pans a setting seeming to be at first an idyllic American suburb, which subtly transforms to reveal a dystopian inner-city quality. Made in the wake of the tragedy of the 2018 Parkland school massacre which took place in Florida, Van der Auwera’s digital processing of documentary photographs and 3D scans of real places, deconstructs spaces and images to create an uncanny imaginary landscape of a highly evocative quality. The artist’s distortions deliberately recall real places and events. For example, the voice-over used is taken from an archive of deleted online content harnessed by the artist from the no longer existent social-media platform, Periscope. The voice-over monologue spoken by a young man provides a narrative on how technology will outlast, preserve, and potentially save us. The promise of technology’s salvation is set against a virtual, constructed visual world. It is precisely the subtlety of transformation in this piece that causes The Sky Is on Fire to be so riveting.

NSJ, 2022

This 3-channel video installation NSJ, premiering at HEK, explores the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in mass demonstrations and civil riots such as the US Black Lives Matter movement. In striking images marked by chaos and unrest, Emmanuel Van der Auwera exposes the various processing data with which AI reads the scene – from the identification of bodies to the analysis of patterns in human movement. AI’s mechanic lens of the world takes shape in these videos, of which the first shows schematic outline examination, the second exposes colour grid modules used in movement pattern analysis, while the third reveals how AI recognises shapes. It is a world in turmoil that Van der Auwera presents to us. In impressive images, he dissects the algorithmic regime of the gaze and reveals its working methods without exposing people and faces.

VideoSculpture XXV (Archons), 2022

In Van der Auwera’s video sculptures, the screen itself becomes a sculptural medium, revealing its image-producing function beyond serving as a carrier. Almost a decade ago, the artist began to manipulate LCD screens and disclose their underlying mechanics. With the removal of the screen’s polarisation filter, the familiar window into world events offers instead a void to the human eye. However, when viewed via dark glass plates on tripods placed in the room or on the floor, the inverted images become visible. Only by moving through the space and adjusting oneself to find the right angle to look into the glass plates, is the initially invisible stream of images revealed to the viewer.

Newly created for the exhibition, the large-format VideoSculpture XXV (Archons) consists of eight manipulated screens and four black glass plates via which the images can be seen in their inverted form. Exploring the theme of digital immortality, the work’s narrative is loosely based on futuristic tales by science fiction author Rick Ferguson. In this new work, Van der Auwera reflects on the presence of artificial intelligence in today’s visual worlds. In poetic images, he takes us into the world of deepfakes and AI-generated liquefied landscapes. These transform the scenarios again and again into nostalgic images of a «dream machine» that uses the aesthetics of well-known photo databases. The narrative also includes documentary images that herald the «post-truth» age of the Trump era.

In the age of AI, we can no longer trust our eyes and thus the layering of sound also underlines the possibilities of AI with regards to the accuracy of interpreting of human voices. Even a human being can be digitally incarnated based on their collected metadata and so we are immersed in poetic visions of a post-mortal digital life.

VideoSculpture XX (The World’s 6th Sense), 2019

VideoSculpture XX (The World’s 6th Sense) is a work that reveals itself fragmentarily as one moves between the tripods set up in the space. They are mounted with dark plexiglass panels, which provide visual clues to the narrative of the work’s content. On the screens one can recognise thermal images of pedestrians on the streets of Las Vegas, initially taken by a private company with their special camera with the purpose of promoting it as military surveillance equipment. Advertised as empowering users with the «world’s sixth sense», thermal imaging technology provides precise surveillance and is therefore touted to the US military. The footage demonstrates the thermal imaging camera’s capacity in capturing detail and range. Drained of its colours and surroundings, the scene emerges as an eerie apparition. The cluelessness of the people recorded in the videos mirrors itself in the initial ignorance one feels as a viewer deciphering the video fragments in the space.
VideoSculpture XIV (Shudder), 2017

VideoSculpture XIV (Shudder) is among Van der Auwera’s first works to experiment with the inversion of images via reflecting glass surfaces. The work itself looks void of images, until its reflection in the glass reveals in the negative what is being played on the manipulated screens. It appears as a strangely soulless alternative world, and exudes an uncanny fascination. The video clips were drawn from an online database, originally created for commercial purposes, which the artist searched with terms such as «loneliness», «trauma», «distress» and «sad US Marine». The inversion the artist subjects the material to creates an additional distance that opens into new perspectives. In a true sense of the word, we are immersed in the tremors of our visual world.

VideoSculpture XVII (O’Hara’s on Cedar St.), 2018

The polarising filters of the screens in VideoSculpture XVII (O’Hara’s on Cedar St.), have been partially removed, in strips. While their initial functionality as imaging devices is destroyed, a narrative does become apparent where strips of screen remain intact. They show a film shot during the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, 2001. It tours Ground Zero to the O’Hara’s Irish Pub on Cedar Street, which was a refuge for many workers since the attacks. In this multi-layered work, Van der Auwera allows the trauma of the attack to reverberate, in deceleration and staged choreography. The permanence of the cut in history represented by the date is mirrored in the rigidity of the equipment. Van der Auwera’s work extends the perspective from individual fates to the larger social body and its actions.

Ballistic Gel, 2022

Two plinths hold translucent transparent ballistic gel that have been marked by violence and destruction. While on research in the USA, Van der Auwera visited a shooting ranch where shots were not only practiced on hard targets but also in ballistic gel. Due to its consistency which is similar to the resistance of human tissue, transparent ballistic gel is mainly employed in the field of weapon development and forensics to mimic the effect of bullets on the human body and visually reconstructs their impact. The usually hidden aftermath of a weapon on the human body, is now rendered visible.

Wake Me Up at 4:20, 2017

The video installation Wake Me Up at 4:20 explores internet trends related to YouTube celebrities and the disturbing phenomenon of suicide memes. These provide step-by-step instructions inciting players to ultimately kill themselves. Embarking from the event of two young girls who rose to instant fame following their online suicide through such a game, Van der Auwera created a video with avatars designed by 3D software commenting on the subject and philosophising about identity. Despite their visual resemblance with characters from video games, the avatars seem authentic, speaking with voices extracted from anonymous online video comments. Facial recognition software was used to animate the avatars’ facial expressions; however, since the technology also produces glitches (digital errors), the software causes the faces to freeze or distort strangely as they speak. This in turn makes them appear all the more vulnerable, lending the digital beings a semblance of humanity.

Emmanuel Van der Auwera (*1982) lives and works in Brussels, Belgium. In 2015, he graduated as a Laureate of the Higher Institute for Fine Arts (HISK) in Ghent and received the Langui Prize for Young Belgian Art in the same year. His work has been shown in numerous exhibitions, such as WIELS (Brussels, Belgium), Centre Pompidou (Paris, France), Palais de Tokyo (Paris, France), Centro per l’Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci (Prato, Italy), Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria), Casino Luxembourg - Forum d’art contemporain (Luxembourg City, Luxembourg) and Mu.ZEE (Ostend, Belgium). His works are in important collections such as the Dallas Museum of Art (Dallas, TX, USA), KANAL - Centre Pompidou (Brussels, Belgium), Mu.ZEE (Ostend, Belgium), The National Bank of Belgium Collection (Brussels, Belgium), the Stockholm School of Economics (Stockholm, Sweden), the Otazu Foundation (Pamplona, Spain) and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (Eugene, OR, USA). In 2019, Van der Auwera had his first solo presentation in the United States with White Noise at 214 Projects (Dallas, TX), followed in September by two solo exhibitions in Brussels at Harlan Levey Projects and Botanique. The artist is represented by Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, Belgium.
Supporting programme to the exhibition:

Opening hours Wed-Sun, 12:00-18:00

Special opening hours during Art Basel
Mon-Sun, daily 10:00-20:00

Every Sunday at 15:00: Public guided tours in German
Private guided tours available upon request in German, English & French

Sat 14.05.22, 16:00
Artist talk with guided tour

Sun 15.05.22, 15:00 & 16:00
International Museums Day:
Public guided tours in German & French

Sun 15.05., 05.06., 03.07. & 07.08.22
Happy Sunday with free admission to the exhibition.

Fri 20.05.22, 18:00
Museums Night: Image Encounters
How is our perception affected by technology? Challenge your visual senses with an exhibition of digital art, face an interactive mirror for imaginary encounters and give your eyesight a break as you jump rope with robots.

Sun 29.05.22, 14:00
Family Day:
We invite adults and children to explore the exhibition and join a workshop where we craft, solder, invent and experiment together.

Wed 08.06.2022, 10:00
Mittwoch-Matinée:
Guided tour through the exhibition as part of the «Mittwoch Matinée» of the Museums Basel.

Fri 10.06.22, Thu 30.06.22, 18:00
Curatorial tour with Sabine Himmelsbach.

Tue 14.06.2022, 20:00
Reception during the Art Basel with Live Act:
Reception with Sote & Tarik Barri «Majestic Noise», a Live-AV-Performance presented by HEK and the CTM Festival, DJ Set on the platform with Ieva.

So 19.06.2022, 16:00
English guided tour

More events on www.hek.ch/en/program
The exhibition is supported by:

HEK (House of Electronic Arts) is supported by: