

Press release

Emmanuel Van der Auwera: Seeing is Revealing

14.05.-07.08.2022

Opening: Fri, 13.05.2022, 7pm

Press tour: Fri, 13.05.2022, 11am



Emmanuel Van der Auwera, *VideoSculptures XXV (Archons)*, 2022, installation view, Courtesy Emmanuel Van der Auwera and Harlan Levey Projects

The Belgian artist Emmanuel Van der Auwera is more than just an attentive observer of our time. «Seeing is Revealing» – seeing as revealing, as uncovering something underlying runs like a thread through his work. In his expansive video installations, he devotes himself to questions of perception – from the mediated experience of a world seen through a smartphone to the images that come from intelligent machines. He often refers to real events, uses existing material from the Internet, which he re-sorts, deconstructs for its meaning and transforms into impressive aesthetic image tableaux. For his first solo exhibition in Switzerland, Van der Auwera created three new works that will be on view at HEK for the first time. The exhibition offers a representative overview of the artist's work.

With a formal rigour and reduction to the essential, Van der Auwera dissects and analyses the meaning of images – how they depict reality but also construct it at the same time. He finds his

material in the rampant image production of a global screen culture and the imaging processes of new technologies, including artificial intelligence. From this flood of images of our digitalised world, he creates expansive, immersive installations of enigmatic appeal and aesthetic strength. In his works, he reduces his documentary source material to a minimum in a very poetic way, delicate and fragile. He thus creates aesthetic experiences that make the underlying socio-critical questions accessible as a sensual experience in a fascinating and compelling 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. A few years ago, Van der Auwera began manipulating LCD screens, cutting up their imaging polarising filters. Eventually, he removed them altogether, exposing their underlying mechanics. The screen, which is usually our window to world events, now offers only a blank view to the human eye. The images only become visible again through dark glass plates placed in the room on tripods or on the floor. Only the movement in the room and the right angle of view reveal the initially invisible flood of images to the viewers. The artist turns them into active participants.

In his works, the artist devotes himself to current media events, directs his gaze to tragedies and taboos of our mediatised world or to topics related to developments in social media. He collects confessional video streams on streaming platforms, or material from news channels and the image databases of commercial providers. Like a chronologist, he collects in order to create his visual worlds from such observations of our present. In his narratives, he skillfully combines the genres of documentation, reconstruction, and fiction to make their constructedness clear through the recontextualization of images. In doing so, he negotiates the most pressing issues of our time, ranging from the dwindling freedom of the press to the expansion of the surveillance state, driven by the «search for the collective human experience», as he himself writes.

Curator: Sabine Himmelsbach

#EmmanuelVanderAuwera #hek_basel

The exhibition and the supporting program are supported by Vidi-Square, MindSpaces S+T+ARTS Lighthouse, the Volkart Foundation and the BLKB Foundation for Culture and Education.

The artist is represented by Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels.

Emmanuel Van der Auwera (*1982) lives and works in Brussels, Belgium. In 2015, he was a laureate of the Ghent University of Fine Arts (HISK) as well as receiving the Langui Prize for Young Belgian Art. His work has been shown in numerous exhibitions, such as WIELS (Brussels, Belgium), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea Luigi Pecci (Prato, Italy), Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria), Casino Luxembourg – Forum d'art contemporain (Luxembourg), and Mu.ZEE (Ostend, Belgium). Van der Auwera's work has been acquired by various renowned collections such as the Dallas Museum of Art (Dallas, TX, USA), KANAL Centre – Pompidou (Brussels, Belgium), Mu.ZEE (Ostend, Belgium), and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art (Eugene, OR, USA). In 2019, the artist had his first solo show in the United States entitled *White Noise at 214 Projects* (Dallas, TX), followed by two solo exhibitions in Brussels at Harlan Levey Projects and Botanique in September 2019.

Works exhibited (in chronological order):***(Yet Untitled), 2022***

3-channel video installation, HD videos, sound.

In his new 3-channel video installation, Van der Auwera addresses the use of artificial intelligence in mass civil riots, for example in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA. In impressive images, he reveals the training data of AI and its machine view of the world, which ranges from the identification of bodies to the analysis of human movement patterns. One video shows the analysis of outlines, another the colour grid as a building block for the analysis of movement patterns. The third video reflects on how AI identifies shapes and how they move in the image. These are images of chaos and disorder, images of drones zooming in on us. 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 how it works without exposing people and faces.

VideoSculpture XXV (Archons), 2022

8 LCD screens, black glass, cable, HD video, sound

The new large-scale video sculpture, consisting of eight manipulated screens and four black glass plates on which the images can be seen inverted, pertains to the theme of digital immortality. The loose narration is based on the futuristic tales of science fiction author Rick Ferguson, whose voice can be heard briefly in the work's soundtrack. 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 deep fakes and AI-generated liquefied landscapes. These transform themselves again and again into new scenarios, 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 the sound level also underlines the possibilities of AI in the perfect interpretation of human voices. Even the human being can be digitally incarnated based on his data. We are immersed in poetic visions of a post-mortal digital life.

Ballistic Gel, 2022

2 sculptures made of ballistic gel

During a research stay in the USA, Van der Auwera visited a shooting ranch where not only hard targets were shot at, but also transparent ballistic gel that allows for the analysis of the effect of a bullet on the human body. The gel is as transparent as glass and has a similar consistency to a human body. The artist uses this pseudo-scientific object as found footage. As in many of his works, he is concerned here with the inversion of our gaze. We marvel at something that cannot usually be seen. As an anthropomorphic experimental arrangement, we experience, as it were, a transparent human body. Violence and destruction of tissue is made vivid as the beauty of horror.

The Sky Is on Fire, 2019

3-channel video-installation, HD videos, 15:21 min, sound

Using a constant, slow camera pan, the expansive 3-channel LED video installation *The Sky Is on Fire* shows the subtle transformation of a quaint American suburb into a dystopian urban setting. The work was created in the context of the tragedy of the Parkland school massacre in Florida in 2018. Van der Auwera used 3D scans of real places to create a digital imagery of a high evocative quality. The artist consciously uses the resulting distortions as a digital reminiscence of real places and events. He deconstructs spaces and images by taking documentary images and processing them digitally. The result is an uncanny non-place. In voice-over, we listen to the monologue of a man who reflects on how technology will outlast us and thus preserve and save us. The artist counters this belief in technology's promise of salvation by deconstructing its reality-building effects.

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

6 LCD screens, polarisation filters, plexiglass, 10 tripods, cable, HD video, 13:34 min, sound

VideoSculpture XX (The World's 6th Sense) reveals itself through the viewer's own movement in space. Dark plexiglass panels distributed around the space on tripods provide visual clues to the narration. The reflected image fragments are photographs of thermal images of pedestrians in the streets of Las Vegas, taken by a private company with a special camera for advertising purposes to promote their technology to the US military. Promoted as the «world's sixth sense», thermal imaging technology provides precise surveillance. The footage shows the capabilities of a thermal imaging camera in capturing detail and range. Stripped of its colours and surroundings, the scene becomes an eerie apparition. The cluelessness of the people being photographed is mirrored in the unawareness of the audiences as they explore the space.

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

12 LCD screens, polarisation filters, metal, cable, HD videos, 20:34 min, sound, 180 x 112 cm

In *VideoSculpture XVII (O'Hara's on Cedar St.)*, Van der Auwera removed the polarising filter from the screens in strips, destroying their functionality as imaging devices. These can now only be seen where the screens are intact. On view is a photograph taken on the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001 around «Ground Zero» to the Irish Pub O'Hara on Cedar Street, which was the focal point for many rescue workers. In his multi-layered work, the artist allows the trauma to reverberate: In the slowing down and staged choreography, but also in the insurmountable caesura that this day represented, mirrored in the rigidity of the devices. In this work, Van der Auwera widens the view from individual fates to the larger social body and its actions.

VideoSculpture XIV (Shudder), 2017

4 LCD screens, black glass, cable, HD videos, 7:13 min, sound, 206 x 117 x 130 cm

In *VideoSculpture XIV (Shudder)*, Van der Auwera uses black glass as a mirror for the first time. The polarising filters removed from the screens make them «blind». Only through the reflection in the glass does the video material become visible in inverted form, as a strangely inanimate alternative world that nevertheless radiates an uncanny fascination. The video clips come from an image database that the artist searched for the terms «loneliness», «trauma», «distress» or «unhappy US Marine». Created for commercial contexts, Van der Auwera alienates the material to allow a new perspective. In the truest sense of the word, we are immersed in this visual world that makes us shudder.

Wake Me Up at 4:20, 2017

HD video, 12:22 min, sound

The video installation *Wake Me Up at 4:20* is dedicated to internet trends, YouTube celebrities and the disturbing topic of suicide memes. In these memes, players are ultimately instructed to kill themselves. Inspired by true events, the stories of two young girls who committed suicide online and immediately became public celebrities, Van der Auwera has avatars created by 3D software philosophise about identity. Despite their archetypical appearance based on characters from video games, the avatars seem authentic due to their voices that stem from anonymous video comments from the net. The faces were partly animated with facial recognition software, a technology that also produces glitches, i.e. digital errors. These errors in the software cause the faces to freeze or become distorted, which makes them appear all the more vulnerable and appears to give these digital beings a trace of humanity.

Program of events and outreach activities

An extensive program of events and outreach activities will accompany the exhibition. On Saturday, 14 May 2022, there will be a talk with the artist at 4 pm.

There are regular guided tours in German, English and French. Every Sunday during the exhibition, there will be a free guided tour (in German) at 3 pm. Curator guided tours will be offered on 10 and 30 June 2022 at 6 pm each day.

Further activities will be announced. An extensive program of digital outreach activities is also being designed to accompany the exhibition.

Information

HEK (House of Electronic Arts)

Freilager-Platz 9, 4142 Münchenstein/Basel

Opening hours: Wed-Sun, 12-6pm

Admission: 9 / 6 CHF (reduced price); Happy Hour (free admission): Wed-Fri 12-1pm

Public guided tours: every Sunday at 3pm (German)

For more information visit: www.hek.ch

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About the HEK (House of Electronic Arts)

HEK (House of Electronic Arts) in Basel is Switzerland's national competence centre for all art forms that employ or reflect on new technologies and media. The HEK's interdisciplinary approach offers a broad public with insight into art production from various genres at the conjunction between art, media, and technology. In a diverse program of exhibitions, smaller festival formats, performances and concerts, the HEK is dedicated to taking a closer look at current social issues and questions as well as technological and aesthetic developments. In addition to organising exhibitions and events, the HEK is concerned with the methodology of collecting and the preservation of digital art.