



UNLEASHED UTOPIAS

*Artistic Speculations about
Today and Tomorrow
in the Metaverse*

Dr. Tina Sauerlaender, DKB AG and CAA Berlin (Eds.)

VR ART PRIZE

by DKB in Cooperation with CAA Berlin

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about Today and Tomorrow in the Metaverse*

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Virtual Utopias for a Better World

Foreword by Jan Walther,
Member of the Board, Deutsche Kreditbank AG

In recent years, our society has undergone numerous upheavals and crises in rapid succession, eliciting fears and conflicts within our communities. An end to these challenges does not appear imminent, and the pressure on our societal cohesion is unlikely to diminish in the near future.

Therefore, it is crucial that we adapt to these uncertainties, cultivating mindsets and strategies that are forward-thinking. Most importantly, we must envision our futures, as it is only through this process that we can actively shape them.

Art can illuminate a path into the future, crafting alternative worlds for the “here and now.” Unrestrained in thought and action, art, especially in virtual reality, transcends the confines of physics and

biology. It creates new realms—spaces for utopias, speculations, and fantasies. How can we make our world more sustainable, socially just, and peaceful? Which technological possibilities can contribute to a better society? Furthermore, as our interaction with art, communication, and coexistence progressively extends into the digital realm, how does this evolution alter our experiences?

These are the questions explored by the artists nominated for the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in collaboration with CAA Berlin. The 2nd edition delves into possible futures, the interplay between virtuality and reality, the impact of artificial intelligence, and our existence in the metaverse.

We were delighted to organize this enriching exhibition at Haus am Lützowplatz in 2023, in collaboration with CAA Berlin, curator Dr. Tina Sauerlaender, and an expert team. Heartfelt thanks go to all who contributed. As a digital bank, our aim was to foster discourse and advocate for the medium of 'Virtual Reality' in art. Engaging with our future is a priority for us, and we are pleased if we have sparked new thoughts and ideas, even in you, dear reader.

Immersion into a Utopian World

Foreword by Betti Pabst,
Managing Director CAA Berlin gGmbH

Virtual and augmented reality are significant in the realm of digital art, serving as autonomous modes of artistic expression for artists. In this new territory, aesthetic entanglements, novel perceptions, and hybrid experiential spaces emerge.

In the second edition of the VR ART PRIZE, the exhibition *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS. Artistic Speculations about Today and Tomorrow in the Metaverse* delves into inquiries about the efficacy of utopias. It prompts contemplation on how art can engage with swiftly evolving realities and the avenues available for viewers to reflect on these changes through artistic experiences. Virtual artworks provide an unexpected opportunity for audiences to immerse themselves in unfamiliar worlds, fostering empathy and facilitating playful exploration.

Accompanying the exhibition program, the DIGITAL ART LAB featured talks, discussions, performances, and workshops aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding of the creation of VR art, as well as insights into the capabilities of AI and other digital applications. Attendees had the chance to engage in programming digital art themselves.

The VR ART PRIZE's open call for artworks and installation concepts offered a wide view of the aes-

thetic, thematic, and technical realms currently being explored by artists. The continual expansion of technical possibilities within the medium affords artists new creative avenues to shape immersive worlds that invite active participation. The exhibition curated by Dr. Tina Sauerlaender at the Haus am Lützowplatz showcased five selected works out of 84 submissions. The exhibition seamlessly blended physical space installations with virtual experiences.

The Contemporary Arts Alliance Berlin serves as a platform for private support in nurturing emerging talent across visual arts, theater, music, and dance since 2007. By fostering dialogue between art, society, and the economy, the CAA Berlin, in collaboration with DKB, supports an interdisciplinary and forward-looking art scene in Germany through initiatives such as the VR ART PRIZE.

This edition of the VR ART PRIZE has once again proven that forward-thinking projects are possible in art through sustainable engagement. Our heartfelt thanks go to Jan Walther and Christine Faßnacht from DKB, Dr. Tina Sauerlaender and Peggy Schoenegge with their team, the artists for the wonderful exhibition, and Katharina Schilling and Marc Wellmann from Haus am Lützowplatz for their hospitality.

The CAA Board: Stephan Balzer, Katharina Ehler, Marianne Esser, Grischa Feitsch, Sigi Pieper, Ulrich Plett, Alexandra von Stosch, Loretta Würtenberger

POWER OF UTOPIAS

Artistic Speculations for Our Present and Future in the Metaverse

Dr. Tina Sauerlaender

The perspective afforded by “magic spectacles”¹ uncovers a marvelous realm devoid of diseases, storms and death. This fantastical world is vividly portrayed in science fiction writer Stanley G. Weinbaum’s short story, *Pygmalion’s Spectacles* (1935). Weinbaum calls this utopia Paracosma, a “land-beyond-the-world”², which protagonist Dan Burke explores with the aid of these extraordinary glasses. Weinbaum’s narrative captures one of the earliest instances of virtual reality experienced through eyewear. In contrast to the dystopian visions prevalent in more contemporary science fiction novels like *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline (2011), *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (1992), and *Neuromancer* by William Gibson (1984), Weinbaum’s Paracosma emerges as a “fantastic Utopia” and a flawless illusion. This world unfolds in real-time from the viewer’s perspective, offering interactivity and three-dimensionality, allowing one to engage the senses of taste, smell, and touch. The title, *Pygmalion’s Spectacles*, draws inspiration from the ancient tale of Pygmalion, a sculptor who, enamored by his own creation of Galatea, witnesses her transformation into a living being through divine intervention. Building on this myth, Dan Burke falls in love with the beautiful Galatea as he enters Paracosma.

Today, when contemplating virtual worlds, we often ask ourselves: Do these places truly exist? Is what we experience a dream, an illusion, or reality? In *Pygmalion’s Spectacles*, Dan Burke grapples with similar existential questions upon leaving Paracosma and bidding farewell to his cherished Galatea after removing the enchanted glasses. Professor Ludwig, the visionary creator of these glasses, elucidates that our perceptions and sensations are “mental phenomena residing in our minds.”³ This sentiment aligns with the contemporary perspective of David J. Chalmers, a professor of philosophy and neuroscience at New York University, who, in homage to René Descartes, asserts that the mind serves as the “site of our perception [...] seeing an apple is a state of my mind.”⁴ Given that the perception of both physical and virtual environments activates analogous mechanisms in the brain, modern neuroscientific research frequently employs VR environments to replicate physical experiences and facilitate social interactions.⁵ Chalmers explains, “virtual realities are genuine realities” [...] What happens in VR really happens.”⁶ This sentiment is echoed by Professor Ludwig, who contends that, when the illusion is impeccably crafted, it metamorphoses into reality, enabling us to forget about “the paradoxes of illusion.”⁷

¹ Stanley G. Weinbaum, *Pygmalion’s Spectacles*, 1935.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David J. Chalmers, *REALITY+. Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.

⁵ Corey Bohil, Bradly Alicea, Frank Biocca, „Virtual reality in neuroscience research and therapy”, November 2011, in: *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 12(12), 752-62.

⁶ Chalmers, *REALITY+*.

⁷ Weinbaum, *Pygmalion’s Spectacles*.

When virtual worlds intersect with the utopian visions of visual artists, they wield a substantial influence akin to that found in literature. The term utopia refers to an elysian, non-existent place. This fictional construct arises from the shortcomings of contemporary societal conditions, crafting an enhanced rendition of the world or an ideal community.⁸ Utopias raise questions such as: What happens when you change the rules? How can we live well together? These visions delve into the potentialities of our coexistence, harboring significant potential for instigating societal change.

The immersive utopias in the exhibition *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS. Artistic Speculations about Today and Tomorrow in the Metaverse* connect the physical with the virtual realms. Artists Marlene Bart, Anan Fries, Mohsen Hazrati, Rebecca Merlic, and Lauren Moffatt embed their VR works within spatial installations specifically designed for the exhibition space. Additionally, their augmented reality artworks overlay and connect the physical with the virtual world, creating a holistic experience for the viewers. These works critically explore various technologies, including VR, AR, artificial intelligence (AI), 3D scanning, and animation. The artists skillfully demonstrate how these technologies can be harnessed to foster a more just, diverse, and intimate coexistence. In addition to showcasing technological possibilities, the artworks address the ongoing evolution of societal values and norms toward a more diverse paradigm, thereby linking their speculative visions with current debates.

In *Theatrum Radix* (2022), artist Marlene Bart digitizes natural-historical artifacts and crafts speculative sculptures inspired by them. These creations

find a home in virtual worlds and manifest in the exhibition space as both glass objects and 3D prints. Through this process, Bart offers a poetic perspective on the pursuit of knowledge and the relationship between nature and science. Anan Fries transcends the confines of biological gender separation with *[POSTHUMAN WOMBS]* (2022), presenting a world where all bodies have access to pregnancy. Ectobags, resembling external uteri, are available for visitors to wear through augmented reality (AR). These bags facilitate the growth of fetuses outside the body, fostering a more equitable distribution of care. Rebecca Merlic celebrates the liberation from binary identities, physical transformation, and the diversity of human individuality with *GLITCHBODIES* (since 2022). In her work, 3D-scanned queer personalities form a diverse society in a virtual world. An AR version embeds the monumental sculptures in our physical environment, where they claim their place. In *FAL Project [None AI]* (2023), Mohsen Hazrati references the Persian tradition of using the poetic verses of Hafez to serve as prophecies and brings them into a new virtual world using AI, VR, and AR. He critiques both AI itself, portraying it as menacing, squeaking metal monsters, and the impact of human influence on AI. Lauren Moffatt translates the descriptions of inner states from nine women into images using AI. She then paints, digitizes, and assembles these images into a virtual landscape. *Local Binaries* (2022/2023) reflects the self-defined world and identity of its inhabitants.

Alongside artworks, a diverse array of virtual spaces is emerging today. The utilization of VR headsets has become entrenched in numerous fields, includ-

⁸ Definition of the term based on: Thomas Morus, *De optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*, 1516.

ing neuroscience, medicine, and psychology. Industries are leveraging VR to plan and visualize production processes, as well as to control machinery. Educational institutions, such as universities and colleges, are incorporating this technology across a spectrum of disciplines. Since 2023, the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce has introduced the vocational training program "Immersive Media Designer." The recent rebranding of Facebook to Meta signals a heightened commitment to the development of technologies in the Metaverse domain. The Metaverse encompasses all virtual worlds accessible online, primarily through VR headsets. This transformative realm is reshaping our interactions, as communication no longer unfolds through traditional channels like websites, social media, or video conferencing services. Instead, it transpires in virtual spaces where individuals engage as avatars. Within these spaces, people can attend concerts, gather in chat rooms, and collaborate in virtual meeting or classroom environments. Facilitated by open-source software such as Mozilla Hubs and Spoke, individuals can easily and freely create and utilize virtual spaces. Furthermore, readily available technologies in VR include AI applications like ChatGPT or DeepAI, along with 3D Lidar scanners for capturing spatial environments, which are now standard features in some smartphones. The convergence of the virtual and physical worlds is happening rapidly.

Pygmalion's Spectacles concludes with the revelation that Paracosma was a theatrical production orchestrated by Professor Ludwig. Disenchanted by the perfect illusion, Dan Burke learns that his virtual beloved, Galatea, is none other than Ludwig's niece, Tea, and thus she also physically exists. Relieved, he acknowledges, "Paracosma was attainable at last!"⁹ Just as Dan Burke's virtual experience finds its counterpart in reality, today, the virtual seamlessly merges with the physical. It is time to ask: How do we want to coexist in the physical world and the metaverse in the future? How do we want to harness the potential of new technologies for a better world? Instead of succumbing to fear and paralysis induced by dystopian scenarios, we have the opportunity to embrace positive values and actively shape both our physical and virtual environments. The artists featured in *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS* exemplify this ethos. Their unleashed utopias challenge societal norms and resist the purely profit-oriented use of new technologies. Through their radical speculations, they unveil new perspectives on our existence and interactions. In their visions, they fortify values such as openness, diversity, and tolerance that ought to define our society both now and in the future. Is this wherein utopia lies?

Between Art and Technology: Media Literacy in the Metaverse

Peggy Schoenegge

The fusion of art with new media such as Virtual Reality (VR) or Augmented Reality (AR) has not only changed their representations but also reshaped how we perceive, experience, and evaluate them. In this process, as observers or more precisely as users, we become integral components of digital artworks. By donning VR headsets and utilizing controllers, we actively engage with and navigate within virtual realms. Likewise, we pick up tablets to unveil digital overlays on the screen, adding another layer to our interactive encounter with art.

This interactive approach is an established tradition in art. For instance, in 1942, Marcel Duchamp redefined the exhibition space by turning it into an obstacle course with his installation *Sixteen Miles of String*, providing viewers with an active engagement with the artwork. In a similar manner, visitors had to shift their positions in front of Bridget Riley's painting *The Fall* (1963) to generate the distinctive Moiré effect characteristic of Op Art. Myron Kruger's *Videoplace* (1974) transformed the projection surface into a realm for interaction using telecommunication technology. Through bold gestures, viewers in different locations interacted as abstracted digital representations. Artists have consistently sought to involve their audience in their work, employing cutting-edge tools. However, what sets contemporary approaches apart are the technologies and media

that necessitate a novel form of interaction with artworks. Tied to specific media, artists craft virtual arenas that demand a departure from traditional art and require audience engagement.

In the era of the Metaverse, Web 3.0, and Artificial Intelligence (AI), evaluating digital works solely on an aesthetic level is no longer sufficient. The role of media in the reception process cannot be overlooked. Consequently, the technological component in the relationship between the work and the viewer assumes a crucial role, both in terms of content and form. Unlike physically interactive artworks, which viewers directly perceive with their bodies, digital works involve navigation at the interface between the physical and virtual realms. Interfaces such as controllers, VR headsets, and tablets serve as tools that facilitate immersion in digital worlds, creating an avenue for exploration. This dynamic interaction gives rise to a unique form of art appreciation—one that is inherently technological.

Actively participating in the process of creating art through media interaction directs the viewer's focus toward the medium, thereby enhancing awareness. Within this experiential realm of artistic-technological exploration, the lines between artwork and technology blur. This leads to a broadened comprehension of art, concurrently cultivating a more in-depth approach toward the respective medium.

Art utilizing digital media encourages a skillful and critical engagement with new technologies, skills that viewers can apply in their daily lives. For art institutions, this entails developing modern presentation formats that facilitate a holistic experience. Exhibition organizers require an understanding of

and expertise in technology installation, as well as effective visitor support. User-friendly experiences extend beyond simply offering interactive digital artworks; they must establish an exhibition setting that ensures seamless accessibility and encourages exploratory interaction.

Adopting this approach, exhibition spaces assume an active role. Beyond serving as mere venues for showing art, they also act as mediators of technologies, fostering a competent understanding of them. This includes a distinct educational mandate, particularly given that VR technology is not yet widely integrated into daily life but is becoming more relevant within the context of the Metaverse. In this manner, art institutions can significantly contribute to instilling critical and meaningful engagement with digital technologies. Themed exhibitions offer a suitable and crucial opportunity for this purpose.

In this context, the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin honors artistic achievements and supports the development of media literacy, particularly in the realm of immersive technologies. Ensuring accessibility and support, the exhibitions *RESONANT REALITIES* (2021) and *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS. Artistic Speculations about Today and Tomorrow in the Metaverse* (2023) accomplish this by integrating VR and AR artworks into site-specific installations. However, the focal point for media literacy in 2023 is *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS'* accompanying program, known as the DIGITAL ART LAB.

During Berlin Art Week 2023 at the Haus am Lützowplatz (HaL), a five-day series of panel discussions, lectures, workshops, and performances unfolded around the theme of art and new technologies. In

his opening keynote, Alistair Hudson (Scientific-Artistic Chairman of ZKM, Karlsruhe) underscored the significance of integrating art with new media and connecting emerging artistic techniques to the art historical canon. The panel *What is it about VR?!* demonstrated how immersive impact and creative potential are fundamental characteristics of VR technology. Wenzel Mehnert (Futurist at the Austrian Institute of Technology) highlighted the importance of fictional visions in shaping our perception of the future, bridging the thematic discussion of this year's exhibition. Galerist Johanna Neuschäffer (Office Impart) explained the concept of NFTs and provided insights into collecting digital art. Simultaneously, in Coding Art Labs artists demonstrated how to create applications like FaceFilter using simple tools. This is just a glimpse into the diverse content that engaged visitors, allowing them to utilize digital tools throughout the program.

The goal is to decode and elucidate the intricate processes of digitization in the current era. This approach brings to light both the potential and limitations of digital applications, rendering them more tangible. Deliberate exploration of various facets of new technologies prompts visitors to actively engage with and critically contemplate the digital transformations in our society. They discover the ability not only to consume content but also to actively shape virtual worlds, transitioning from passive consumers to participants in shaping the digital landscape. However, the manner in which we employ new technologies also determines aspects such as supply and demand, market trends, and research perspectives. Simultaneously, it influences structures like data collection, personalization mechanisms, and privacy. Our consumption behav-

ior plays a pivotal role in shaping these mechanisms, ultimately determining the outcome of media in general. Through critical examination and resulting usage behavior, we exert influence on these processes and make a significant impact.

This awareness is crucial to ensure that the development of such technologies is not solely driven by economic motives. The process must incorporate both individual and social concerns. A critical understanding of media is a key competency in our time. It goes beyond mere content consumption; it involves verifying authenticity and meaning while comprehending its impact on our society. Conferences like *Lost in "Metaverse"? Towards the Entanglement of Real and Digital Worlds (2023)*, run by The German Ethics Council, underscore its socio-political relevance. The JFF–Institute for Media Education in Research and Practice also stresses the importance of skilled media navigation.

The exhibition functions as a space to experience art, and acts as a bridge, establishing a dynamic experiential environment to convey the intricacies of digital and immersive media. It aids in overcoming hesitations related to engaging with new tech-

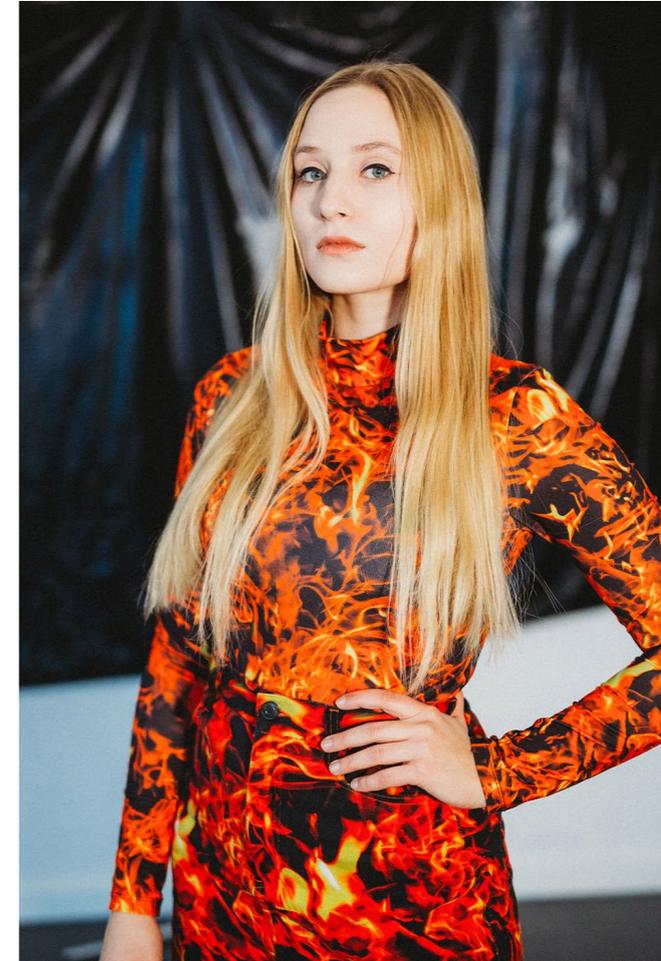
nologies. The themes explored within the artworks, such as diversity or the application of AI, enhance the capacity to critically reflect on media content and resist being influenced by clickbait headlines. Art serves as a reflection of contemporary trends, unveiling the implicit structures of a technologized society.

Engaging with digital art fosters media literacy and enables viewers to comprehend the challenges and opportunities of digitization, actively contributing to the shaping of virtual reality. The artworks featured in the exhibition *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS* illustrate how new technologies can be harnessed for the betterment of society, promoting a more inclusive, diverse, and tolerant coexistence. Media literacy is a crucial prerequisite for actively participating in the shaping of our digital future within the Metaverse.

Marlene Bart

Marlene Bart works at the intersection of natural history, anatomy, and the visual arts. She combines scientific and artistic images to create a new visual language. To what extent does this common visual language make it possible to rethink systems of order in the natural sciences? Here, Bart's research is also artistic—how can the human relationship to these categories be influenced and even altered by virtual reality. Using a variety of techniques (prints, artists' books, sculptures, installations, VR), she shifts historical books and other evidence into a contemporary context. Marlene Bart studied the visual arts under Professor Wolfgang Ellenrieder at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste in Braunschweig (HBK), at Villa Arson (École nationale supérieure d'art) in Nice and at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. She has a master's degree in "Art in Context" from the University of the Arts Berlin (UdK) and completed her doctorate at the Bauhaus University in Weimar (BUW) on the subject of „The artist's book as a multimedia encyclopaedia“. Marlene Bart lives and works in Berlin.

marlenebart.com



Theatrum Radix 2022

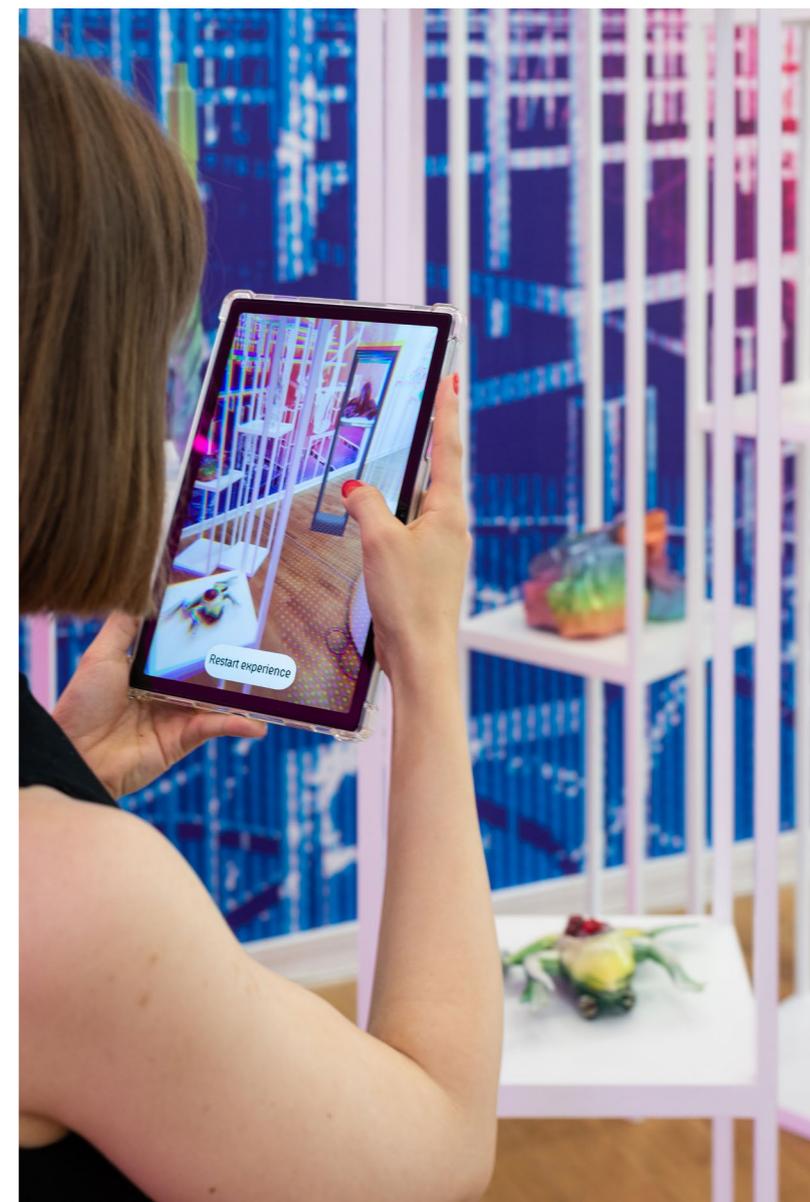
Theatrum Radix by Marlene Bart combines systems of categorization used in natural history with contemporary technologies such as CT scans and 3D modeling. In the virtual space, natural objects are turned into new, surreal, moving pictures and supplemented by artworks. Viewers literally immerse themselves inside of bones, or a glass brain, or in the interior life of a dissected frog. Boundaries between the

types of animals and plants are dissolved, creating a speculative outline dealing with habitats and systems of order. This allows viewers to change perspective. They find themselves at a remove from the human, anthropocentric perspective, and the systems it uses to categorize nature. The title can be traced back to a seventeenth-century Italian philosopher, Giulio Camillo, and his *Theater of Memory*. Camil-

lo planned a theater in which he could unite knowledge of the world and of the universe, like an encyclopedia. *Theatrum Radix* picks up on this idea and creates a hybrid universe oscillating between the physical world and virtual space. It opens up a playful, interconnected view of objects, instead of reproducing order as a hierarchical concept.







The AR experience is closely linked to the VR work. The virtual shelf corresponds to the physical version in terms of its dimensions. Through a holographic process, various animated objects are revealed one after the other. The virtual and physical installations merge into one another.



*Still from the VR experience Theatrum Radix
by Marlene Bart*

Anan Fries

3rd Prize VR ART PRIZE by DKB
in cooperation with CAA Berlin 2023

Anan Fries is a digital and performing artist. They are the former artistic director of the game-theater collective machina eX, which is known for its immersive, gamified experiences. In addition, Anan Fries is a co-founder of Henrike Iglesias, an experimental performance collective with a strong love for pop and politics. Anan explores correlations between technology and what we regard as “nature” and “natural.” They are interested in the question of how technologies can be used to make queer perspectives accessible. Fries’s works are conceived at the intersection between digital and performing arts. In 2021, in cooperation with the sound artist Malu Peeters, Fries created *VIRTUAL WOMBS*, a hybrid of a VR experience and live performance, and in 2022 [*POSTHUMAN WOMBS*], a VR essay that has been shown at the IDFA DocLab in Amsterdam, DOK Leipzig, GIFF Geneva, Konsthall C in Stockholm, and elsewhere.

ananfries.net





[POSTHUMAN WOMBS] 2022

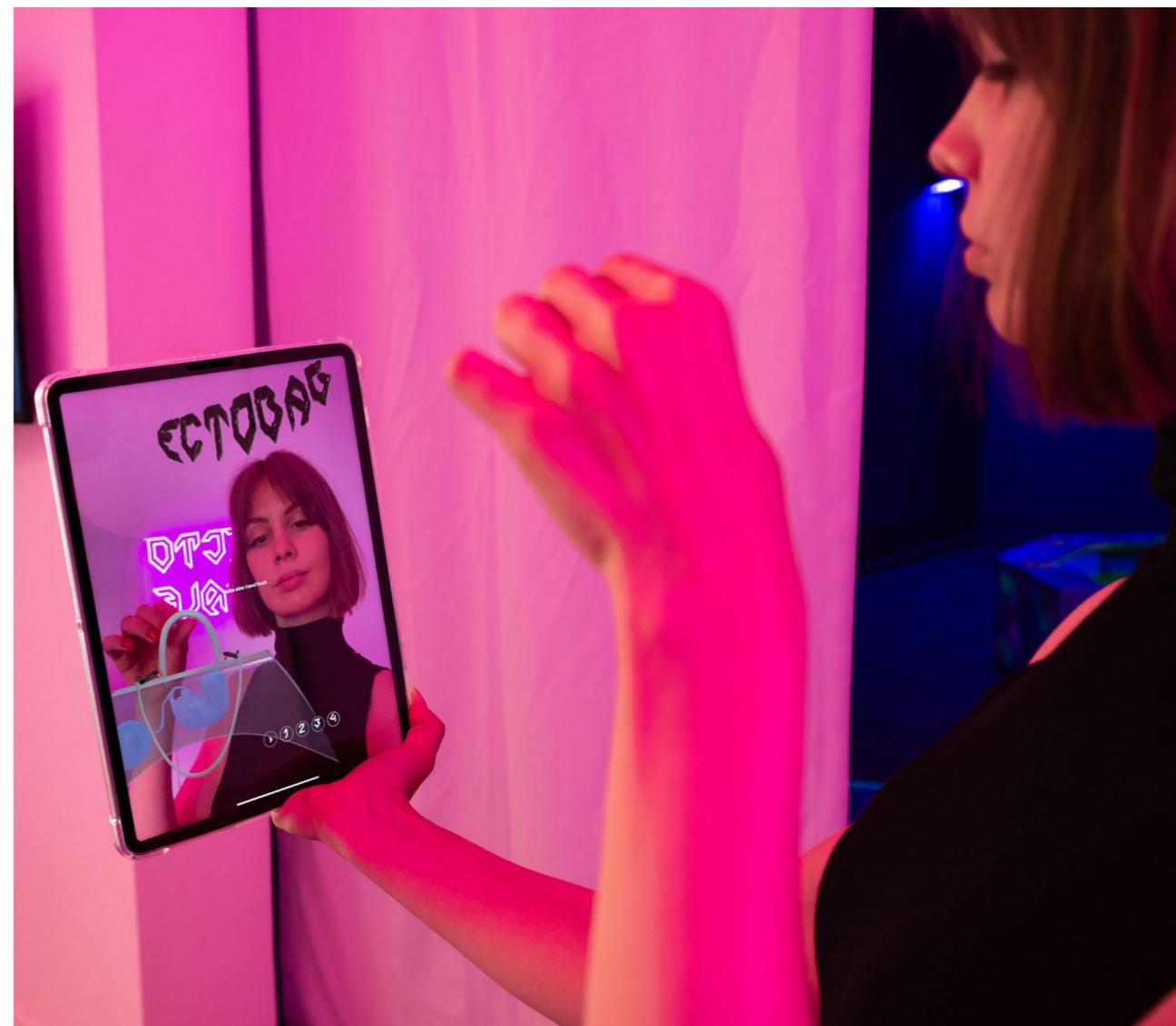
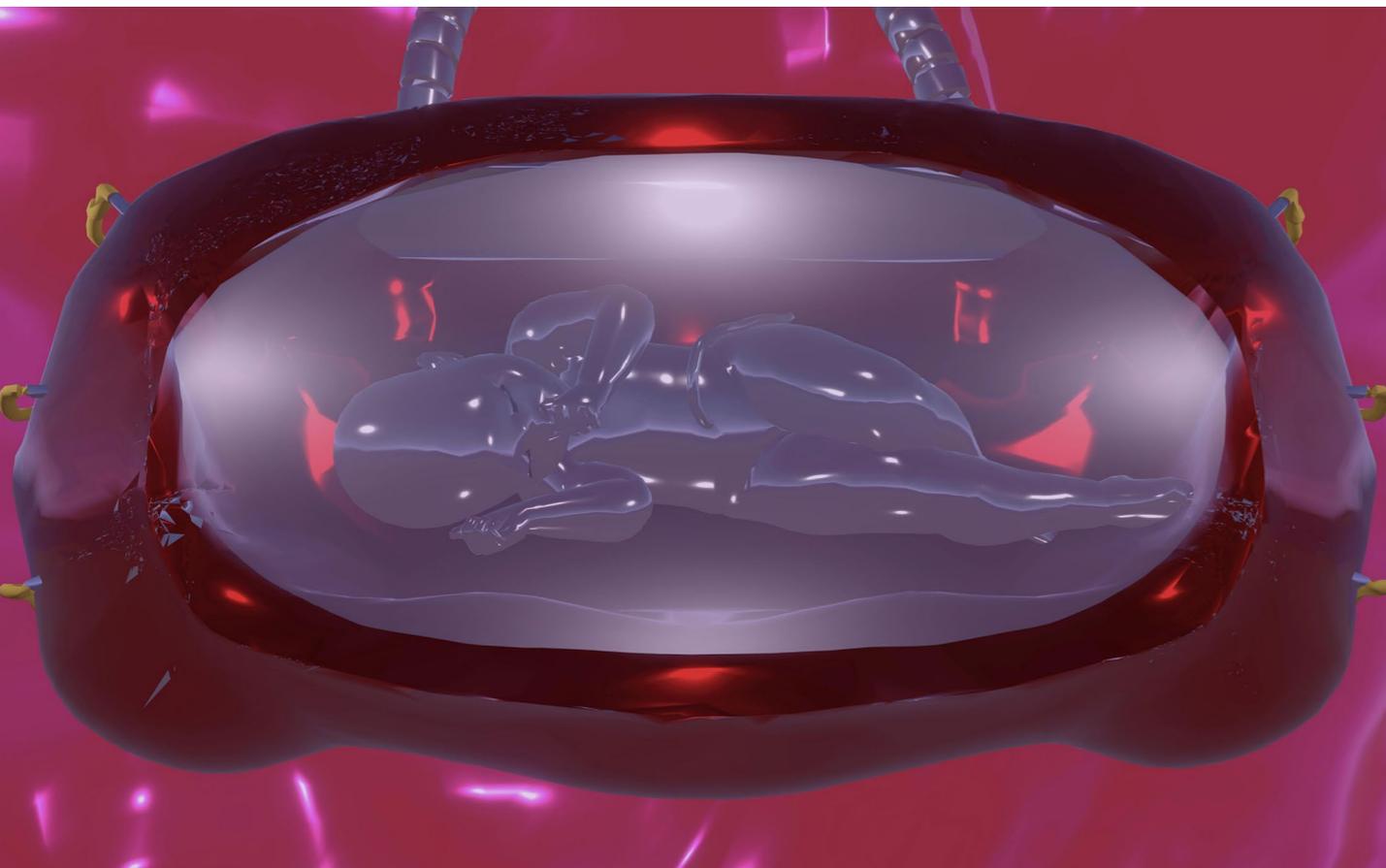
[POSTHUMAN WOMBS] by Anan Fries is a gentle journey into an immersive landscape inhabited by pregnant people, called “posthumans.” Nature and technology are not opposites here but directly linked to each other. *[POSTHUMAN WOMBS]* is Anan Fries’s exploration of a non-binary pregnancy and the desire to find community in otherness. The “posthumans” living in the landscape are virtual versions of people who are connected to the theme of pregnancy through either art or activism. They have been 3D scanned and digitally impregnated. The work questions common norms and role models, speculating about a possible future in which pregnancy is a technological hack that can be applied to all bodies. Here, in this fictional, speculative world, bodies and gender are not binary but manifold. The piece creates a new perspective on pregnancy in our society, above all, taking into consideration the possibilities for a freer and more equal way of living.



Inside the installation, visitors are immersed in a space illuminated in pink light, which reflects the color palette of the VR work. They sit in a "ball chair," which gives them a feeling of being enclosed. The surrounding installation draws upon motifs of the VR experience, transferring them to the physical exhibition space.



Stills from the VR experience [POSTHUMAN WOMBS] by Anan Fries



Using the tablet, visitors can explore the Ecto-Bag AR collection by Anan Fries. Ectobags are bags that resemble an external uterus, in which fetuses can grow outside of the body.

Mohsen Hazrati

1st Prize VR ART PRIZE by DKB
in cooperation with CAA Berlin 2023

Works by the artist Mohsen Hazrati deal with the process of linking traditional literature with digital technologies. After majoring in graphic design, with a minor in new media and digital art, Mohsen Hazrati graduated from the Shiraz Art Institute of Higher Education in 2012. His art has been seen at a variety of conferences, for example at the University of the Arts Berlin, the Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste (State Academy of Fine Arts) in Stuttgart, the IAM weekend Barcelona, EVA, the Multimedia Anthropology Lab at University College London; the Electronic Literature Organization Conference at the University of Central Florida, TEDxMollaSadraSt (Shiraz, Iran), and at exhibitions in the Grafikenshus Museum, peer to space, Radiance VR, Synthesis, Triennale Fellbach, and Transfer Gallery. With Milad Forouzande, Hazrati cofounded the *Dar-Al-Hokoomeh Project* (a new media art project) which he has been curating since 2013 in Shiraz, Iran. The artist lives and works in Berlin.

mohsenhazrati.com



FĀL PROJECT **[NONE-AI]** 2023

Mohsen Hazrati works with bibliomancy, a process that employs books to foretell the future. In this case, he uses a volume of poetry called *The Divan* by the Persian poet Hafez, who lived in Shiraz in the fourteenth century. Words from a randomly selected poem by Hafez are used to create an artificial intelligence (AI) algorithm which then generates a collection of data made up of random texts which can be found on the internet. With this data, users can obtain their own indi-

vidual divinations based on a random AI principle, then interpret the results to predict their own futures. The artist uses AI as a means of divination, transferring centuries-old literature and culture to the digital world. In the process, he attempts to keep his own influence as minimal as possible. In accordance with Iranian tradition, where a budgerigar bird usually selects the verse, the human being recedes into the background here, too. Divination is given space to reveal itself with-

out any human influence. The word „none“ means “without intelligence” in Farsi. In contrast to the commercial usages of AI, the goal here is to create a type of AI that does not work logically, but rather as if it was drunk, to enable spiritual divination that is not controlled by humans.

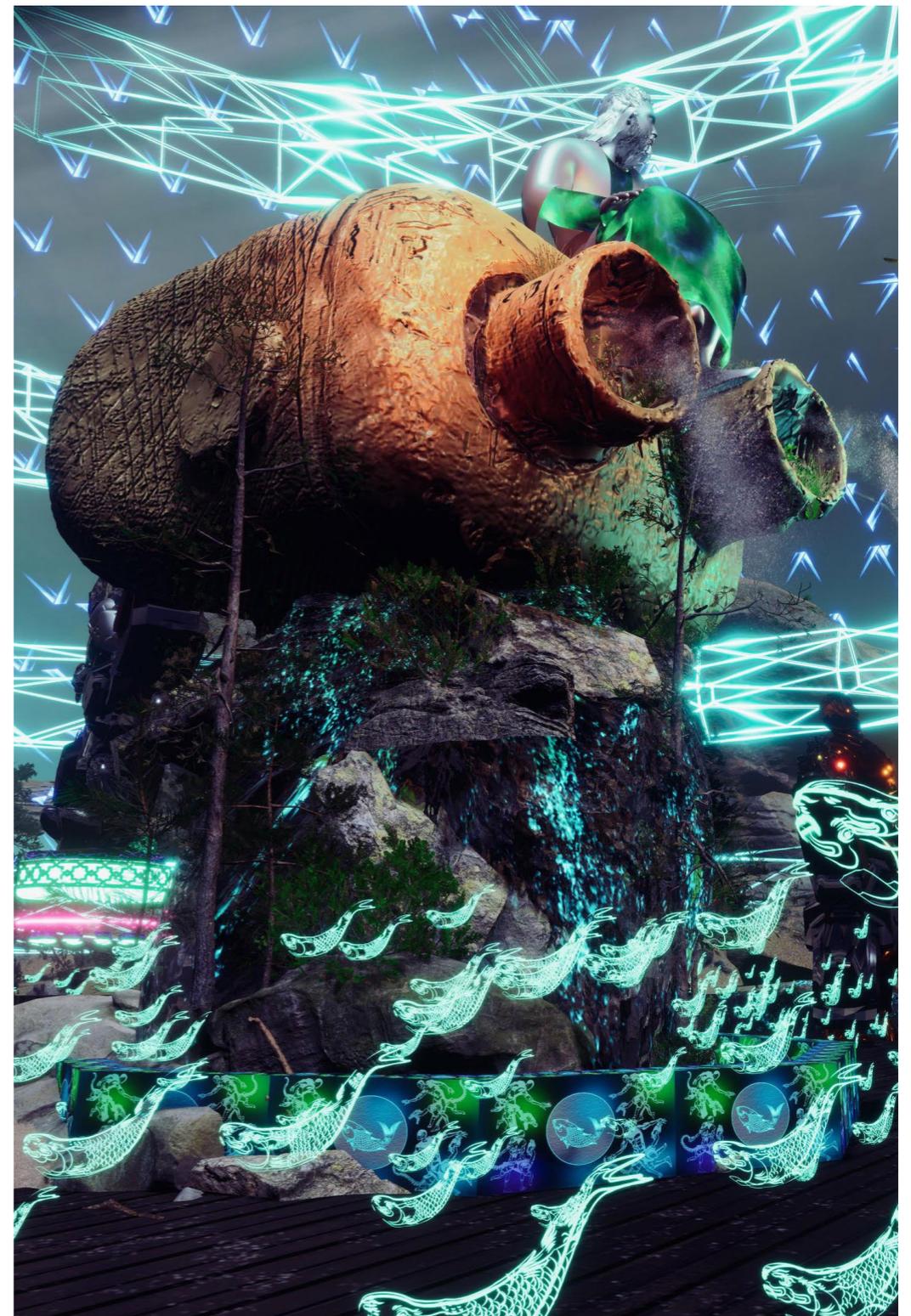


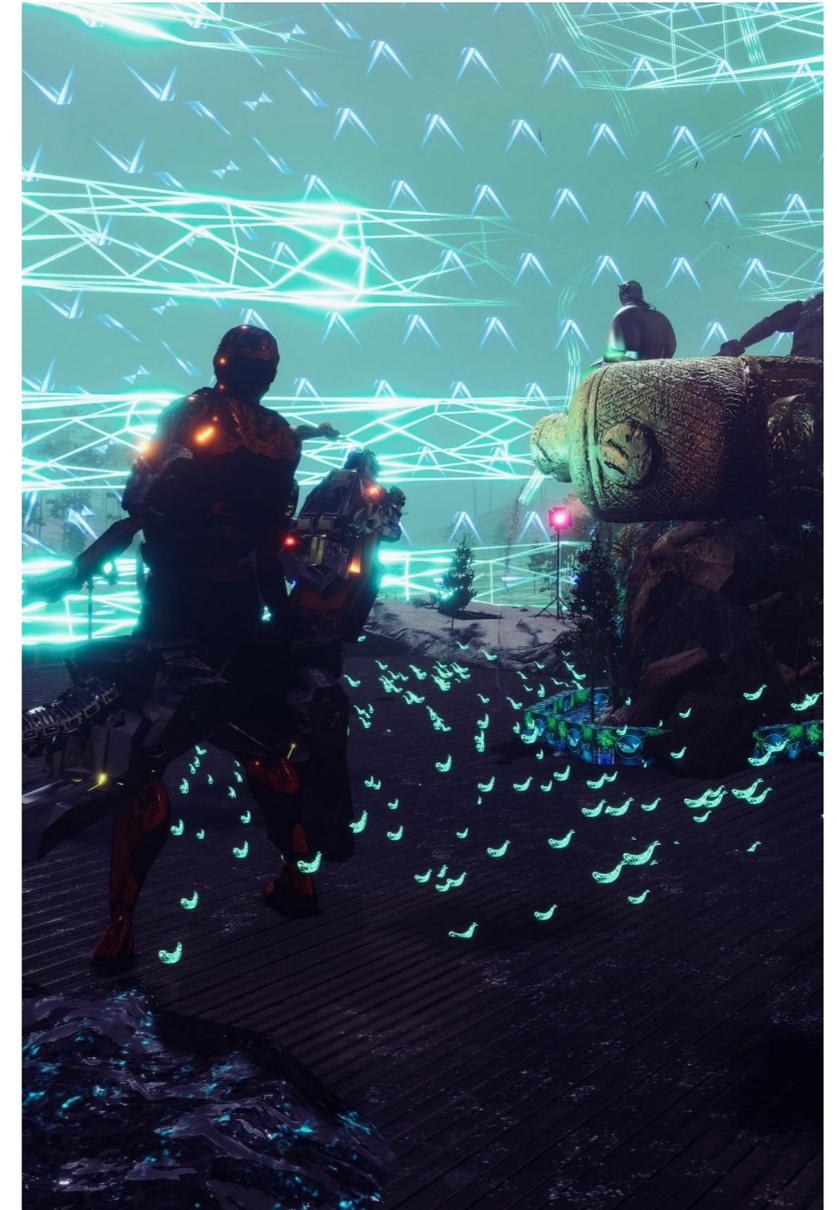


Inside the installation, the visitors are immersed in a dark purple room with fluorescent light. A fountain is reminiscent of those from the Iranian-Persian tradition. The ceramic tiles and the VR headset were made of clay by the artist himself.



Using the tablet visitors can activate the fountain and receive a personal divination.





*Stills from the VR experience FĀL PROJECT
[NONE-AI] by Mohsen Hazrati*

Rebecca Merlic

2nd Prize VR ART PRIZE by DKB
in cooperation with CAA Berlin 2023

Rebecca Merlic is an artist, architect, and experimental filmmaker. In her work, she examines alternative forms of society and considers how social and economic conventions can be changed. Using digital technologies such as 3D scans, she creates new ways to depict diverse identities in a virtual society. She is the winner of the 2020 Marianne von Willemer Prize for Digital Media. Currently, she is a transdisciplinary participant in the European Alliance of Academies: Ignorance is Strength AIR program, in collaboration with the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Art), Berlin and the HDLU (Croatian Association of Artists), Zagreb. Additionally, she is working on the project *DigitalHumanism x Future-Living* in collaboration with the Austrian Cultural Forum in Tokyo.

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GLITCHBODIES 2022-ONGOING

GLITCHBODIES by Rebecca Merlic is an interactive computer game as well as an immersive experience in virtual reality (VR). Here, Merlic draws on the structures of video games, a widespread form of digital entertainment. The artist does research into new forms of feminism, LGBTQ+ and drag communities. Using 3D scans, she makes digital avatars off of real people, which are then embedded into virtual landscapes. She creates intimate and sensitive images of dif-

ferent individuals, and taken together, they give rise to a diverse society in virtual space. Individual identities become a collective body, a network, which turns the avatars into politically charged bodies. They are contrasts to the heteronormative and binary avatars that are usually encountered in classic video games. Instead, *GLITCHBODIES* takes us on a journey through realities of people who share the notion of "queer" as a political attitude.

*Using an organically shaped carpet, the installation combines the various versions of the piece *GLITCHBODIES*, from the VR experience and the AR work, to the short film, a performance documentation, and interactive computer game. The installation brings the colorful worlds of the virtual space into the physical one, as does the wallpaper featuring the protagonists.*





Using the tablet, visitors can place the protagonists themselves into the space and alter their size.



Stills from the VR Experience GLITCHBODIES by Rebecca Merlic



Still from the VR Experience GLITCHBODIES by Rebecca Merlic

Lauren Moffatt

Lauren Moffatt creates immersive environments using experimental approaches and narrative structures. She investigates the connections between physical and virtual spaces and bodies. She is especially interested in the blurred boundary between digital and organic life. The artist works with a mix of traditional, obsolete, and pioneering technologies. These combinations lead to speculative fictions whose origins can often be found under real circumstances. Lauren Moffatt studied painting, the theory and practice of new media art, and audiovisual art at the College of Fine Arts (AU), the Université Paris VIII (FR) and at Le Fresnoy Studio National des Arts Contemporains (FR). In 2022 Moffatt was honored by the Certamen Internacional de Arte Digital (ES) and is the recipient of the Revista MAKMA Prize (ES); in 2021 she was awarded first prize at the first VR ART PRIZE of the DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin (DE). She divides her time between Berlin and Valencia.

deptique.net



LOCAL BINARIES

2021 (AR), 2023 (VR)

“Everyone you meet carries a world inside themselves. What does yours look like?” The artist Lauren Moffatt posed this question to nine women around the world. With the help of therapeutic mindfulness techniques (such as body mapping, for instance), the participants concentrated on their internal state, describing it as a landscape. They imagined geological shapes, sounds, plants, weather systems, and architecture in order to ex-

press their inner state. Afterward, they then relayed their scenes to the artist. Moffatt recreated the elements of each report and worked with artificial intelligence (AI) to visualize every single detail described. She then painted the images produced by AI by hand, scanned them, and finally modeled and animated them in 3D. Working with software normally used to make computer games, she creates a vast, virtual universe. In it she weaves and

collages together the individual stories, allowing users to interact with them. *Local Binaries* collaborates with digital technologies in order to create a collective and intimate place that is deliberately decelerated and decentralized. Moffatt’s world offers an alternative to the metaverse visions of the tech giants.

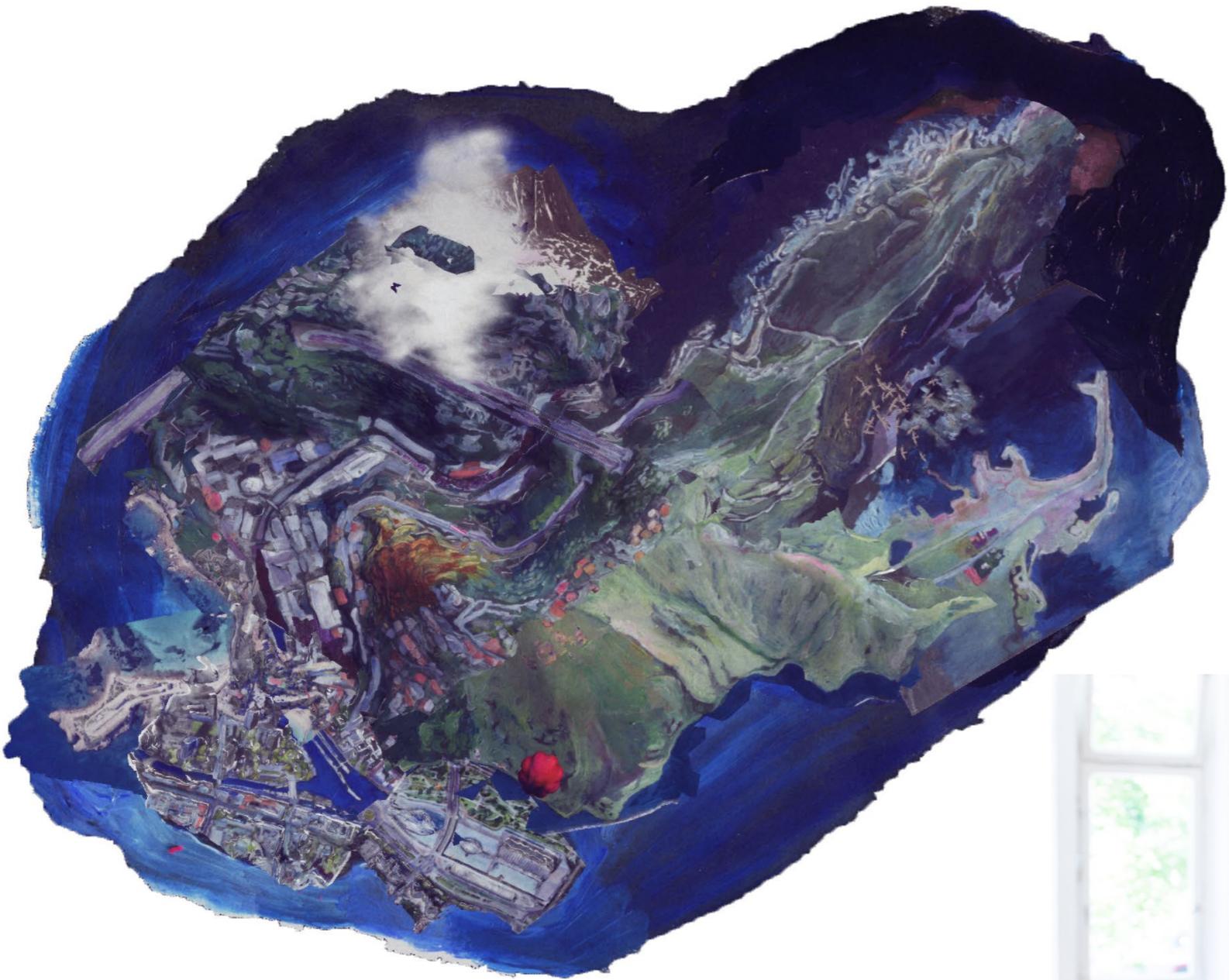




The interconnected installation elements reflect the different stations in the working process of Local Binaries—from body mapping workshops to virtual environments—and show some behind the scenes work between the artist and the algorithms and technologies.



*Left:
Still from the VR experience Local Binaries by Lauren Moffatt*



In the AR version, visitors have the opportunity to explore the Local Binaries world with a tablet in the exhibition space.



AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES



Dr. Tina Sauerlaender is an art historian, curator, speaker and writer. She focuses primarily on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and society as well as on immersive technologies in art. She is artistic director of the VR

ART PRIZE by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin. She is co-founder and co-director of the independent exhibition platform and curatorial collective *peer to space* founded in 2010. She has been organizing and curating international group exhibitions such as *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS* (2023) and *Resonant Realities* (2021), both exhibitions of the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin at Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin, and *The Unframed World. Virtual Reality as Artistic Medium for the 21st Century* (House of Electronic Arts Basel, 2017). Dr. Tina Sauerlaender is co-founder of Radiance VR, an international online platform for VR experiences in visual arts. She is founder of SALOON, an international network for women working in the arts. Dr. Tina Sauerlaender lectures internationally on VR art e.g. at re:publica (Berlin), ZKM (Karlsruhe), New Inc (New York), and Kunsthalle (Munich).

peertospace.eu/tina



Peggy Schoenegge is an independent curator, writer and co-director at *peer to space* as well as chairwoman of Medienkunstverein Berlin. She holds a B.A. and M.A. in Art History from Humboldt University Berlin and Technical University

Berlin and spent a year at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. Her work deals with the conditions and challenges of digitalization and its effects on everyday life, society and culture. Specifically, she addresses gender, performance, and artificial intelligence by curating digital art, internet art and new media art such as VR or AR in both physical and virtual exhibition spaces. Understanding media has become an important concern for her in the course of this work. She lectures and participates in panel discussions internationally at conferences and events such as the VRHAM! Virtual Reality & Arts Festival, Goethe-Institut and the German Ethics Council. She currently teaches in the Expanded Realities program at University of Applied Sciences Darmstadt and cultural informatics at HTW Berlin University of Applied Sciences.

peertospace.eu/peggy

TIME LINE OF THE VR ART PRIZE 2023

OPEN CALL

The Open Call for the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin was launched at the beginning of September 2022 and lasted until November 30, 2022. We received 84 submissions from VR artists living in Germany. The VR ART PRIZE team, under the artistic direction of Dr. Tina Sauerlaender, carried out an initial screening and selection of the 15 shortlisted candidates. Selection criteria: artistic quality, social relevance, concept for the spatial installation, diversity/variety and overall impression.

SHORT LIST

Andrea G.Artz, *Rise of the Tidal Island Queens*

Marlene Bart, *Theatrum Radix*

Valentina Berthelon, *Haunted Landscapes*

Anan Fries, *[POSTHUMAN WOMBS]*

Mohsen Hazrati, *FÄL Project [NONE-AI]*

Kathrin Hunze, *Xanadu*

Janne Kummer, *XBPMMM – Leaking Bodies, Porous Minds, M3lt1ng M4ch1n3s*

Oliver Leo, *Nonexistent Places*

Rebecca Merlic, *GLITCHBODIES*

Lauren Moffatt, *Local Binaries*

Lex Rütten & Jana Kerima Stolzer, *A Rubbles Lament – Klagelieder eines Geröllhaufens*

Robin Rutenberg, *Stonesong*

Anke Schiemann, *Survival Machines*

Alisi Telengut & Tim Rumpf, *Plantsperson*

Pia vom Ende, *Nur die Harten kommen in den Garten*

VIRTUELL VIRTUOS. THE DKB PODCAST ABOUT VR ART (GERMAN ONLY)

A 2nd season of the *Virtuell Virtuos* podcast accompanies the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin. It is once again hosted by Tanja Lepczynski and Tina Sauerlaender. In a total of six new episodes the presenters talk with their guests about VR art.

THE EXPERT JURY

In February 2023, the Expert Jury selected five artists for a four-month work grant worth EUR 4,000 each and as participants in the VR ART PRIZE exhibition at Haus am Lützowplatz.

Emma Enderby, Head of Programmes and Research, Chief Curator, Haus der Kunst, Munich

Nadim Samman, Curator for the Digital Sphere, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

Ulrich Schrauth, Artistic Director, VRHAM! Virtual Reality & Arts Festival, Hamburg, and XR & Immersive Programmer, British Film Institute (BFI) and the London Film Festival

Dr. Alexandra von Stosch, Co-Founder & Board Member CAA Berlin gGmbH, and Managing Director of Artprojekt Entwicklungen GmbH

Laura Wünsche (substituting for Sabiha Keyif), Project Manager Touring Exhibitions, ifa - Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen

TIME LINE OF THE VR ART PRIZE 2023

THE SELECTED GRANT WINNERS

Marlene Bart, *Theatrum Radix*, 2022

Anan Fries, *[POSTHUMAN WOMBS]*, 2022

Mohsen Hazrati, *FÄL Project [NONE-AI]*, 2023

Rebecca Merlic, *GLITCHBODIES*, 2022

Lauren Moffatt, *Local Binaries*, 2023

EXHIBITION PREPARATION

The selected artists were given a 4-month work period with the aim of completing their works and developing site-specific spatial installations in collaboration with the exhibition curator, Dr. Tina Sauerlaender.

OPENING *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS*

On September 8, 2023, the opening of the exhibition *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS. Artistic Speculations about Today and Tomorrow in the Metaverse* took place at Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin. Parallel to the exhibition and Berlin Art Week an extensive accompanying program was launched, the Digital Art Lab.

AWARD CEREMONY OF THE VR ART PRIZE

On September 15, 2023, the Prize Jury selected the three winners of the VR ART PRIZE from the five artistic positions presented in the exhibition and then awarded the prizes in a festive award ceremony at Haus am Lützowplatz. The prize trophy was designed by the Berlin-based artist Tobias Dostal.

THE PRIZE JURY

Yolanda Kaddu-Mulindwa, Director of the municipal galleries Neukölln

Nora O Murchú, Artistic Director, transmediale

PD Dr. Ursula Ströbele, Head of Study

Center for Modern and Contemporary

Art, Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich

Jan Walther, Member of the Management Board,

Deutsche Kreditbank AG, Berlin

Dr. Marc Wellmann, Artistic Director, Haus am

Lützowplatz

Criteria: Artistic quality of spatial installation, artistic quality of VR artwork, technical realization of VR artwork, physical experience (VR and spatial installation), critical examination of the medium VR, critical examination of society, social relevance of the topic.

THE WINNERS OF THE VR ART PRIZE

Mohsen Hazrati (1st Prize, 5.000 EUR)

Rebecca Merlic (2nd Prize, 4.000 EUR)

Anan Fries (3rd Prize, 3.000 EUR)

EXHIBITION *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS*

The exhibition *UNLEASHED UTOPIAS* with the VR and AR artworks and site-specific spatial installations of the five grant winners was shown from September 9 to November 5, 2023 at Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin.

GLOSSARY

3D animation

Creation of three-dimensional moving images in digital environments.

3D printing

Additive form of production in which material is applied layer by layer to form three-dimensional objects.

3D model

Three-dimensional digital representation of an object.

3D scan

Technological process in which a physical object is captured using sensors or lasers to create a digital >3D model of it.

Augmented reality (AR)

Augmented reality in which digital elements are superimposed on a version of the physical world that is transmitted via cameras. >Users can perceive them via a smartphone or tablet screen or AR glasses.

Avatar

Graphic representation of a person online or in a virtual world, e.g. in the form of a picture or a >3D model.

Blockchain

Digital, decentralized and encrypted

database that stores information in the form of blocks (lists of transactions) and is operated by a computer network.

Clickbait

Exaggerated or sensationalized online content and headlines aimed at generating clicks.

Computer animation >3D animation

Controller >Interface

CT scan

A computed tomography (CT) scan is a medical imaging procedure that uses X-rays to create detailed cross-sectional images of a body or object.

Diversity

Variety of individual differences, characteristics and perspectives within a group or community. See also >LGBTQ+

Dystopia

A dystopia is a fictional depiction of a society or world characterized by extreme negative conditions, oppression, violence or a bleak future. It is often used to make social or political commentary and reflect fears of negative developments.

Farsi

A variant of the Persian language and one of the official languages of Iran.

Gender binary

Differentiation according to two clear and distinguishable biological genders: male and female. Cf. >Non-binary gender identity >LGBTQ+

Head-mounted display (HMD)

The head-mounted display (HMD), colloquially known as VR glasses or VR headset, is a display worn on the head that shows image content directly in front of the eyes, creating the impression of >immersion.

Immersion

In the context of >virtual reality, the term describes being entirely surrounded by an illusionistic visual world by means of a >head-mounted display, which blocks out the physical world and turns the virtual world into reality.

Interaction

Interaction describes the possibility for viewers to communicate with a work of art and help shape it. In computer art, this happens through >interfaces.

GLOSSARY

Interface

An interface creates the possibility for >interaction with a work of art. In computer art, this often involves input devices such as a mouse, keyboard or game controller. Hands or the body can also become interfaces.

Cartography

The science and art of map making. It comprises the recording, representation and interpretation of geographical information in order to depict spatial relationships.

Artistic speculation

Creative process in which artists think beyond current reality and create alternative, often futuristic or imaginative scenarios.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

Complex computer algorithms that are used in almost all areas of life. One area is text-to-image AI, where AI is used to automatically generate images or visual representations from textual descriptions.

LGBTQ+

Abbreviation for a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities. The letters stand for lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T) and

queer (Q). The plus sign at the end of the abbreviation symbolizes the inclusivity of other identities. See also >Non-binary gender identity.

LiDAR scanner

LiDAR stands for "Light Detection and Ranging". The device emits laser pulses and measures the elapsed time until the reflected light returns. It enables the creation of 3D maps or models of the surroundings. The technology can be found in some smartphone and tablet models.

Meta

Since October 2021, Meta refers to the company previously known as Facebook.

Metaverse

Virtual, digitized, and interactive environment accessible via the Internet.

Mozilla Hubs

Browser-based platform that is accessible free of charge (open source). You can use the Spoke backend to create >virtual rooms and meet, talk and interact with >avatars in real time (SocialVR). Mozilla Hubs rooms can be entered not only via a screen, but also via >HMDs (WebVR).

NFT

An NFT represents a unique property or piece of digital content and is based on >blockchain technology.

Non-binary gender identity

Gender is not limited to male and female, but there is a diversity of gender identities. See >LGBTQ+ >Queer.

Posthuman

Cultural, philosophical and scientific perspective or theory that goes beyond the traditional concept of the human in a world in which advanced technologies play an increasingly important role.

POV

In interactive immersive art, point of view (POV) refers to the viewer's subjective perspective of the environment.

Queer

An umbrella term that encompasses various non-heteronormative gender identities and sexual orientations. See also >LGBTQ+

Speculation > Artistic speculation

Spoke > Mozilla Hubs

GLOSSARY

Text to image AI > Artificial intelligence (AI)

User

In contrast to the term viewer, the term user is aimed at active participation when interacting via >interfaces in a >virtual world.

Utopia

Imaginary or idealized society or world in which there are no social, political or economic conflicts. The term is derived from the Greek "ou-topos" ("no place") and "eu-topos" ("good place").

Virtual reality (VR)

Virtual reality (VR) refers to the >virtual world perceived through an >HMD as well as the HMD technology itself.

Virtual world

Spatial, interactive environment created with computer technology, with which >users can communicate and interact by means of >interfaces.

VR headset >HMD

Web 3.0

Technological vision for the future of the Internet, characterized by decentralization, >blockchain, >virtual worlds and increased interaction possibilities.

CREDITS OF THE ARTWORKS

Marlene Bart

THEATRUM RADIX

2022

Direction and screenplay by MARLENE BART

Produced as a cooperation of MARLENE BART,

Ikonospace Founder JORIS DEMNARD and

3D Artist MANUEL FARRE

Music by DANIEL BENYAMIN

Anan Fries

[POSTHUMAN WOMBS]

2022

Creator, Director, Script:

ANAN FRIES

Creator, Composition, Sound Design:

MALU PEETERS

Creative Technologist, VR & AR Developer:

AMBRUS IVANYOS

Posthumans:

BRANDY BUTLER, ANAN FRIES, OLIVIA HYUNSIN

KIM, NCUBE AS BIBI, FERCHA POMBO, KÜBRA

UZUN, WHEELYMUM

Installation:

ANAN FRIES

Mohsen Hazrati

FÄL PROJECT [NONE-AI]

2023

Concept und Programming:

MOHSEN HAZRATI

Character Sculptor:

SOROUSH POUYAN

Some VR images from the *Newviewing 43* online exhibition, Barbara Thumm Galerie, curated by Mukenge/Schellhammer

Rebecca Merlic

GLITCHBODIES

2022-ongoing

Director/Artistic Lead/Unity:

REBECCA MERLIC

Unity Programming:

VIVIEN SCHREIBER, ANNA RÜTH (VR)

Sound Design:

MANUEL RIEGLER

Script/Worldbuilding:

GLITCHBODIES Protagonists und REBECCA MERLIC

Lauren Moffatt

LOCAL BINARIES

2021 (AR), 2023 (VR)

Artist, Director & Unity Lead (AR):

LAUREN MOFFATT

VR Adaptation Lead:

NICO NONNE

Interaction Programming:

MOHSEN HAZRATI

3D Assistant:

MARION SERCLÉRAT

Sound Consultant:

MADS MICHELSEN

Script/Worldbuilding:

BANAFSHE HEJAZI, BAY BACKNER,

BUNNYBREAKER, EMMA SHAPIRO, TINA

MCCALLAN (pseudonyms) GLORIA GALLINA, ALBA

MARTINEZ, BRENDA COLLINS, INGRID HAIDIDI,

POLLY SANTORI

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Risk Change: MMSU Rijeka

Developed with the support of CPH: LAB

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UNLEASHED UTOPIAS. Artistic Speculations about Today and Tomorrow in the Metaverse

An exhibition of the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in cooperation with CAA Berlin

September 9 - November 5, 2023 at Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin

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