

ADA Artist Interview with Elke Reinhuber

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Text & Interview by Carla Zamora

<https://www.digitalartarchive.at/features/featured-artists/featured-elke-reinhuber.html>

What have you been working on recently?

As I relocated from Singapore to Hong Kong, I've finally had the chance to finalize my long term project *National Flowers* for an exhibition here last spring. Now, I am compiling the individual images into a new book – Cyanotypes of the flower-like CCTV camera arrays along Singapore's central MRT line. Speaking of books – I just submitted my monograph on Counterfactualism in Fine Arts to Routledge, which will be published in the spring of next year.

Apart from this, I am reflecting on the future of photography and on how technical developments are re-shaping photography already since its beginning, but in particular the influence of computer renderings and artificial intelligence on the medium – which I propose to distinguish from 'classic' photography with the more appropriate term *Synthography*. And this also gives an idea how I combine in my work traditional techniques with current state of the art approaches.

You have been living and teaching in Singapore since 2014. How has the life and environment there influenced your artistic work?

Now I understand the privilege of growing up with unrestricted artistic freedom better – but through limitations, one starts also to become more aware, critical and possibly even more creative.

Previously, I always worked on a low budget with friends and supporters. Now, working on projects with external funding feels in many ways more challenging. My role shifted from the executing artist to the director, producer and administrator. There is for instance my VR project *Garden of Changes*, the representation of a former tropical garden which may serve as a divination device, but also invites to reflect and meditate. The responsibilities for the different team efforts did not always feel like a creative undertaking. Hence, I believe that my personal low-budget projects, such as *Face Value* or *National Flowers* are stronger and more personal.

With my background in photography, I found the diffuse and moderate light in Singapore quite challenging, with no change of seasons and the blue hour being reduced to a few minutes. In this regard, Hong Kong is much more attractive and there are endless sources of inspiration which I am just discovering and filtering to plan my next project.

What especially fascinates you in using different lens-based media technologies like VR, or medical imaging technologies?

There might be a connection to my strong myopia since childhood – I've always had a different vision on the world – a soft colourful abstract image which became sharp and defined the moment I put my glasses on (or later contact lenses). This made me wonder how others, humans, animals, machines, might perceive our world. Now, we can create and even visit different realities – almost like the Holodeck in the science fiction series Star Trek TNG.

When you talk about expanded photography, you also talk about phasmagraphy. Can you explain shortly what you mean by this term and how do you implement your theory in your practice?

The possibilities to capture and represent wavelengths different to what the human eye is able to perceive seems to me as such an interesting subject. Already in the days of analogue B/W imaging, phasmagraphic tendencies proliferated: films, which are not panchromatic, filters blocking certain wavelengths, approaches to visualise sound and obviously radiography gave the viewer an interesting insight into how other species might see the world or what may lay beyond a perceivable surface. Different to the term computational or scientific imaging, Phasmagraphy encompasses clearly an image developed through a section in the full spectrum of physical wavelengths, either visible or invisible. The origin of the Synthograph in comparison is of synthetic nature, developed for instance through AI or computer rendering. I intensified my interest in this research during my PhD as I've had the chance to work in an artist collective on machine vision, initiated by Armin Linke in Karlsruhe, Germany. We visited several scientific imaging research labs at the KIT university and Fraunhofer institutes. Specifically in retrospect, I highly appreciate how supportive all scientists were to share their knowledge and explain the applied techniques. Our research culminated in an exhibition and a publication. I continue to apply different techniques in my artistic practice, for instance, eight years ago I collaborated with the IOSB Fraunhofer Institute Karlsruhe to capture thermographic videos for the ballet production 'Orpheus'. Thanks to COVID-19, this technology became common place and we see our infrared self at every entrance.

You also coined the term "Counterfactualism" in your doctorate thesis, which describes the phenomena how we consciously or unconsciously make (counter)decisions. Why are you interested in the phenomenology of the decisive process? Are you still researching in this area and are other people involved?

The term Counterfactualism has been used already in historiography, as counterfactual history is a well-established subject like counterfactual thinking in psychology and in other disciplines. I am fascinated by the overwhelming choices most of us have, which shape our lives and define who we are. Then, the different strategies how decisions are made and finally, the moment when we look back and wonder what would be today if a decision was made differently in the past or a decisive moment has had a different outcome. I observed an emergent tendency for literature and movies to deal with counterfactual

thoughts and how this phenomenon became an aspect in the fine arts too. Specifically, artists can use their freedoms to explore alternative personalities, which they might acquire, through their artistic practice.

Choice, Decision making and counterfactual thoughts are frequently addressed and incorporated in my works – even if I only challenge my audience to decide in which direction to look or add a second layer to the perceived visuals through augmented reality.

In what sense do you think technology can help us making (better) decisions, or to the contrary - do you think that we even unlearn more and more how to make decisions by using everyday technologies?

Technical devices providing improved solutions are by no means a bad idea, as long as they still allow for variance. Navigation systems demonstrate this very nicely by suggesting optimized routes that are then used by everyone, thus rendering the advantages obsolete again. I am very curious to see how AI will make suggestions on complex questions without us even knowing how these results are calculated. Will it help to choose a vacant seat on the bus, a product we consider to purchase, career options or personal relationships. Decisions can usually only be judged in retrospect, and their quality just becomes apparent in the further course of time. The future, in which these decisions will have consequences, lies in the dark, unknown to us. Technology cannot be clairvoyant either, but can only extrapolate from existing data, which is always outdated and sometimes false.

How do you document and archive your work?

There are many different forms for the diverse types of works. Firstly, the classic analogue photographs and their negatives are well stored in the attic of my parent's house. They would not have survived in the humid climate of Singapore. As most of these works are the foundation for digital pieces, they have been scanned at the time of making (and I should digitize them again with current technology). Digital files are stored on hard drives and their clones and I even kept two old computers from the 1990s to be able to boot some early applications (on Floppy discs, Zip drives and CDs) made with Macromedia Director.

However, I assume it is rather a theoretical concept as I haven't tried it yet in this millennium and the storage medium most likely disintegrated by now.

Although I lost a body of work, which I had done for Manifesta 12 in Palermo, in a stolen suitcase, I am not a friend of the 'cloud' and use online storage only for documentations.

One of the reasons might be that my original files are just too large. Therefore, the documentation is an important part of my work. Often, my installations get displayed in a unique set up for which it has been specifically adjusted and cannot be repeated in the same way in any other location.

For instance, 'Everything Could be so Much Better!', a collaboration with writer Sebastian Pelz, was developed as immersive installation with spatial audio specifically for the cylindrical panorama-environment at ZKM, and later adjusted for a 3-channel projection and 7.1 audio. The concept was chosen for another exhibition where the only adequate form for

presentation was a large behind 30 individual small screens, each with a built-in loudspeaker – quite a challenge for the gallery attendant.

On the other hand, the performative interventions in public space of my alter ego, the Urban Beautician, are mainly staged for the documentation by camera – the final form of presentation – along with some relics from the performance itself.

What do you think about the importance to document and preserve digital/new media art for the future?

Especially from my perspective as an educator, it is an extremely relevant endeavor.

However, new media art is often about the experience of the unknown and very much connected to certain developments in the moment in time – which is hard to preserve and in particular to communicate after the fact.

Working with students who grew up with internet-connected computers and smart devices, I could observe how they take these technologies for granted, which seemed spectacular only some years or already decades ago.

Consequently, it is challenging to share in my classes my personal fascination for early net-art and also the pioneering interactive installations which I experienced during my studies at the ZKM in Karlsruhe in the mid-nineties. To really understand some of the early pieces, it requires some kind of unlearning of that what is easily taken for granted today.

The positive aspect is that in the meantime the concept and content became more relevant than the actual technical achievement of these projects.

Thank you, dear Elke Reinhuber, for your time and contribution to the Archive of Digital Art!