

Real Humans

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Real Humans

The *Real Humans* exhibition presents works by Ian Cheng, Wu Tsang, and Jordan Wolfson, three young American artists, who each, in their own way, reflect on the conditions of what it means to be a human being in their multimedia pieces. Each of them takes on a different perspective, examining socio-cultural, biological, economic or psychological structures into which the human being is integrated and which he participates in generating or even changing. Insofar as the artists have a space of their own to present their works, the exhibition format allows for an “experience space” for singular encounters as well as linkages between the three positions. *Real Humans* represents Wu Tsang’s and Ian Cheng’s first institutional exhibition in Germany, and both artists have developed new works for this show.

Ian Cheng (b. 1984, USA) first studied cognitive science in California before switching to artistic practice in New York. The development of live simulations—a digital process for the production of potentially infinite and unpredictable animations—is at the heart of his works. Their course is calculated in real time so that image and sound are deformed and transformed live. The animated live simulations represent a possibility to rethink the relationship between humanity and

the environment, as well as to playfully make (un-) imaginable evolutions tangible. Questions concerning the relationships between mental structures and behavior, as well as their reciprocal influences are just as present in his works as is the examination of the boundaries of creativity and control, and agency and transformation. Cheng has developed a presentation for *Real Humans* that places human standards against over-dimensioned arrangements so that as a visitor one finds oneself in a situation that cannot be grasped as a whole.

Wu Tsang (b. 1982, USA) is interested in varying forms of identity constructions and related questions with regard to belonging. Tsang examines the gaps between the self and the other in his films and performances by dealing with biographies of people who, for example, are perceived differently and isolated because of their sexual orientation or ethnic background. His personal involvement in the transgender scene and the immigrant milieu is often the starting point for his artistic work in which he restages the everyday experiences of the protagonists, demonstrating repressions or describing processes of transformation and recognition. Of central importance is the play with speech acts that generate and codify, but also alter identity. By employ-

ing the “full body quotation” method he developed, Tsang creates an alienation effect that marks the tension between the depiction and the depicted. Both the power structures into which Tsang is bound as speaker as well as the impossibility of representing the protagonists in all their complexity are dealt with in his films. Several works, including the award-winning film *WILDNESS* (2012), are kept in the style of magical realism, which permits the embedding of the wondrous into the story line without introducing it as something irrational or anomalous.

Jordan Wolfson (b. 1980, USA) plays with the myths and meanings of the capitalist pictorial world that influence desire and imagination. Like a disgorged subconscious, the viewer is faced with a current of images and music that can be read as signs for divergent styles and life plans. By creating affectively charged assemblages—heterogeneous accumulations—from diverse pop cultural material, Wolfson makes psychodynamic processes of the affluent capitalist-oriented society tangible in a particularly striking manner. A two-pronged process between self-determination and self-destruction is revealed: In a world full of possible choices, an individual is articulated who is torn between the desire for belonging and intimacy and the need for isolation and singularity.

Ian
Ch




Detail from still

Ian Cheng
Thousand Islands Thousand Laws, 2013
 Live simulation, sound,
 infinite duration

A flock of herons, an island with plants, an armed computer game figure, a dinosaur, a motorboat, stones and dust are in a permanent state of flux. They bump into each other, mingle, rotate around their own axes, repel each other or grow larger. The dynamic images that are generated live follow an unpredictable course, the logic of which defies human empirical values. The results of the transformation are shown simultaneously from numerous changing perspectives. While the one picture detail is seemingly observed from the standpoint of the viewer, sometimes zooming in close onto the protagonists and sometimes observing the scene from a distance, another one of the picture details shows the field of vision as seen by one of the participants, meaning the various standpoints of the computer game figure as well as the herons or the plants. The viewer's attention concentrates on the interaction between the figures and the resulting hybrids and deformations. Each movement and each supposed disruption of a state of being can like-

wise become the focal point of the events. The characters consequently not only change as far as their behavior and shape is concerned, but also their status. Depending on what finds its way into the frame, they are sometimes in the center of the action or off in the periphery; sometimes they are protagonists, sometimes they are merely props.

Ian Cheng causes a world to come into being in *Thousand Islands Thousand Laws* that cannot be grasped as an entity but draws rather on its multiperspectivity. This is accompanied by such questions as: How does a person deal with the complex structures which he is a part of but which he can neither control nor comprehend? Can human perception be modulated through the process of animated real-time simulation—and perhaps thereby even find a different way of dealing with one's own fragile position?

The only constant in Ian Cheng's *Thousand Islands Thousand Laws* is change. Life is mutation is simulation.

Ian Cheng
ohm y god, 2011
 Spray paint on mylar

“ohm y god” is written at the top of the sculpture bearing this name. The letters are automatically adjusted when the viewer reads this line, so that he understands it to mean “oh my god.” When reading it aloud or to oneself silently, the misspelling seems to be only putative and the sentence is comprehended as a question: “ohm y god” becomes “ohm why god.” Is something superhuman being invoked or is the expression of a superhuman—from someone who is not dependent on an omnipotent creator? Is Clayton Deutsch, who is designated as the author here, master of his own fate or is he following his master’s voice? But Clayton Deutsch in fact stood under someone’s influence to the extent that his hand was guided by Ian Cheng when applying his lines in a superhuman format—as if the author was possessed by a demon that operated within him, controlling his thoughts, actions and intentions. The appearance of the statements applied with red spray paint on a reflective polyester material recall a horror film scenario. As far as their rheto-

ric and forms of address are concerned, they resemble digital messages or automatic writing (“stream of consciousness”)—a narrative technique that renders a person’s seemingly unfiltered thoughts. The statements testify to the desire for control, (self-) optimization and confirmation. At the same time, however, they articulate insecurity and self-doubt. On the one hand, the messages primarily seem to be a sign of life. What is said is not as important as the fact that something is being said. The message becomes a means of asserting oneself and not to drown in the inconsequential stream of being. On the other hand, however, the potent force of communications is underscored when DNA is for example referred to as a life-determining encoding and decoding process. *ohm y god* is consequently a humorous self-reflection that addresses the interplay of technological environmental conditions and processes of identity and communication in addition to inquiring about the diversity of voices within a message.

ohm y god

big words, i feel dumb

oh myg od

I need to have

sex w/ someone w/ blue eyes

so my baby can have blue eyes

and be tall so that they can be

better than everyone

ya and they'll be rich

i hate you

oh wait nevermind i heard ur cool i like u now

haha

someone laughed so i'm laughing too

my clothes

- clayton deutsch



Detail from still

Ian Cheng

Baby ft. Nicoya, 2014

Live simulation, sound, artificial
intelligence services, infinite duration

In *Baby ft. Nicoya* one can eavesdrop on a conversation between three robots. It does not in fact concern an animation in which a discussion among robots is staged but rather the actual live exchange of information generated between three chatterbots, computer-controlled automated dialogue systems that imitate human discussion partners and usually deployed as a kind of service provider. They can answer questions, make queries, provide assistance in an advisory capacity, serve therapeutic purposes and search needed information from a database. They are intelligent machines that not only can present themselves as customer consultants but also as a friend or sexual partner. The configurations of many chatterbots are oriented on childlike reasoning because their cognition is characterized by the ability to learn. These chatterbots are consequently in a position to learn from the experiences of their previous conversations; their software mutates the more different dialogue situations they undergo.

The round of talks initiated in Ian Cheng's *Baby ft. Nicoya* is not based on imitation but rather simulation. To the

extent that human participants are excluded from the discussion, its dynamic course is determined entirely on the basis of an algorithmic communication of zeros and ones. In the process, not only is the English discourse translated into the language of artificial intelligence but also the image data. The signs in the simulation are just as much a part of an emergent reality as physically real existing persons, bodies and objects.

What happens when signs not only represent something but are also active protagonists? How does information operate then? It is at all possible to evaluate the exchange between robots from a human perspective? Is communication solely oriented on understanding? And what effect does it have on the respective participating entities?

Ian Cheng's *Baby ft. Nicoya* is a child of the information society. Communication, the interaction between different entities, is diverse as regards its forms, standards and evaluation. The manner in which information is conveyed and processed is constitutive for knowledge, being and reality.

Ian Cheng
Something Thinking of You, 2015
 Live simulation, sound, variable loop
 duration

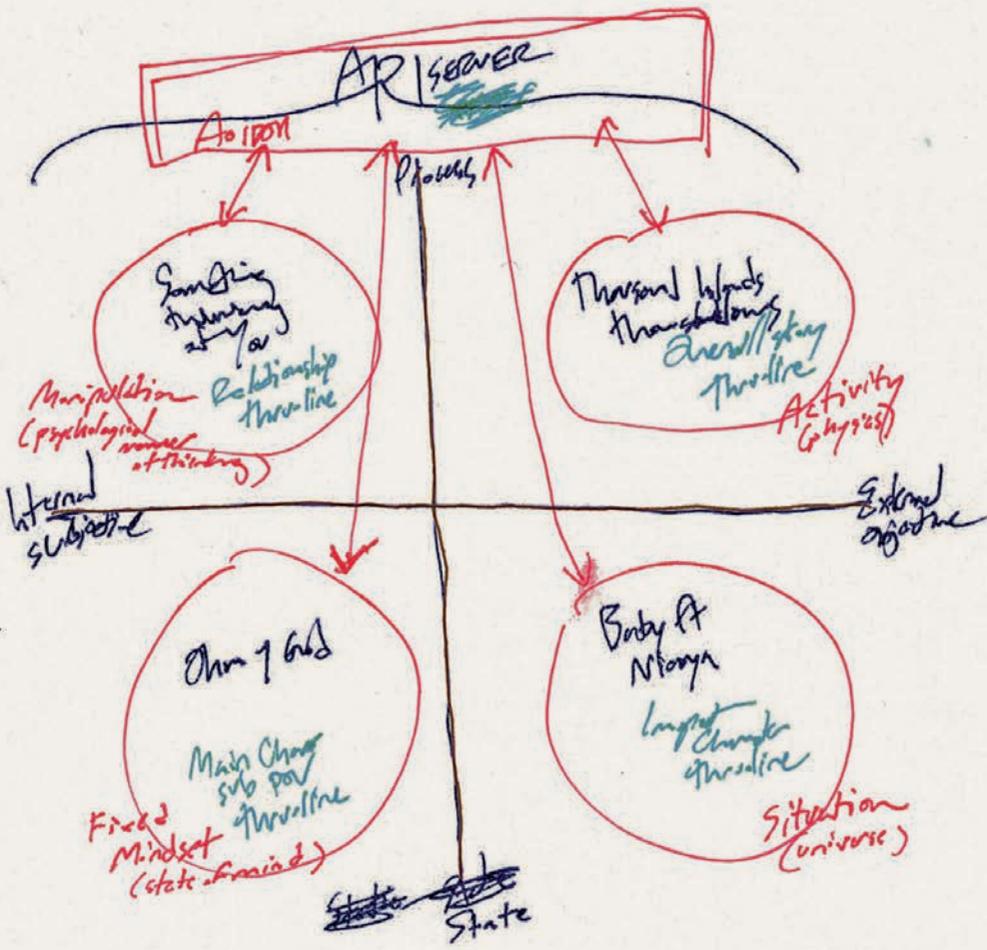
Ian Cheng's most recent work *Something Thinking of You* is a performative allegory concerning the relation between consciousness and intelligence.

Since the modern Enlightenment at the latest, the distinctiveness of the human being as opposed to other creatures is founded on his intelligence—the capacity to think, recognize, perceive and differentiate between things. Cheng's film *Something Thinking of You* argues, by contrast, that technology now also has the ability to made decisions of its own. In addition, it addresses the topic of the conscious human mind as the result of an evolutionary process lasting millions of years and hence not to be understood as something primordially human. In a free adaption of the book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* by the psychologist Julian Jaynes (1978), Ian Cheng has produced a filmic experiment examining the boundaries of intellect. Jaynes advanced the hypothesis that human beings formerly did not have a reflective consciousness but experienced vocal hallucinations instead. These were comprehended as voices of authority and were obeyed. Deferring to

the instructions of such voices meant delegating the responsibility for one's decisions, which led to easing the burdens of the psyche. As life's realities grew more complicated over time, this mental system could no longer withstand stressful situations and the ensuing collapse led to the formation of a consciousness and an ego that took responsibility for itself. Ian Cheng takes up this chain of thought in his animated film *Something Thinking of You* in which organisms undertake a walk to the unknown. Insofar as the film is partly pre-programmed according to a screenplay and partly contains live simulations that are generated anew at each shown, it puts the comprehensive faculty of these agents as well as the underlying software to the test. In story lines that never repeat themselves, *Something Thinking of You* allows the viewer to observe how the behavior of them and their relationship to each other changes. Will the system break down here and lead to the emergence of a new type of cognition? What is still considered to be the subject here, what is considered human and what living?



Detail from still



Ian Cheng
Aoidoi, 2015
API language

In his installation conceived especially for *Real Humans*, Ian Cheng again takes up questions that circulate throughout his works, for example ones concerning human and technological agency, the boundaries of reason or the reaction between intelligence and behavior. He designed a code-based API (application programming interface) language that interconnects the four works exhibited here. They accordingly actively enter into a relationship with each other, meaning that the artworks consequently speak to each. Changes in speed, volume or light conditions can for example express a reciprocal influencing and be the outcome of communicating. The mutations dissolve the boundaries of the respective works. In the process, it remains uncertain who is affecting whom. With *Aoidoi*, Ian Cheng created a quasi immaterial piece for *Real Humans* that questions the attention economy of exhibition presentations.

Wu
Tsang





Detail from still

Wu Tsang

Shape of a Right Statement, 2008

HD-video, 5:15

The short film *Shape of a Right Statement* is based on the video *In My Language* published on YouTube in 2007 by the American autism activist Amanda Baggs. With the aid of a speech output communication device she formulates a powerful manifesto against the discrimination that she and other autistic persons experience.

For *Shape of a Right Statement*, Tsang re-performs the computer voice. Employing the technique he developed and designated as “full body quotation” he not only just recites Baggs’s text but also performatively imitates inflection, breathing, idiom etc. In this way the speech computer’s impersonal mechanical sound is retained and it becomes evident that Tsang is not speaking with his natural voice, i.e. is not telling his own story. Against the backdrop of a glittering curtain that breaks up the static of the staging, he looks frontally into the camera at eye-level with the viewer. He wears a beige wig cap (signifying preparation for a drag performance) which makes the artist’s person even more unrecognizable. Because he almost never blinks, tears finally well up in his eyes—an ex-

tralinguistic communication that heightens the intensity of the situation even further. The fact that he does not speak for Baggs but that Baggs speaks “through” Tsang results in a shift of the text inherent to every translation, thus posing questions concerning the performative power of language, among others. Tsang made the film in the Silver Platter bar in Los Angeles, whose history as a refuge for the Latin American LGBT community is documented in his film *WILDNESS*.

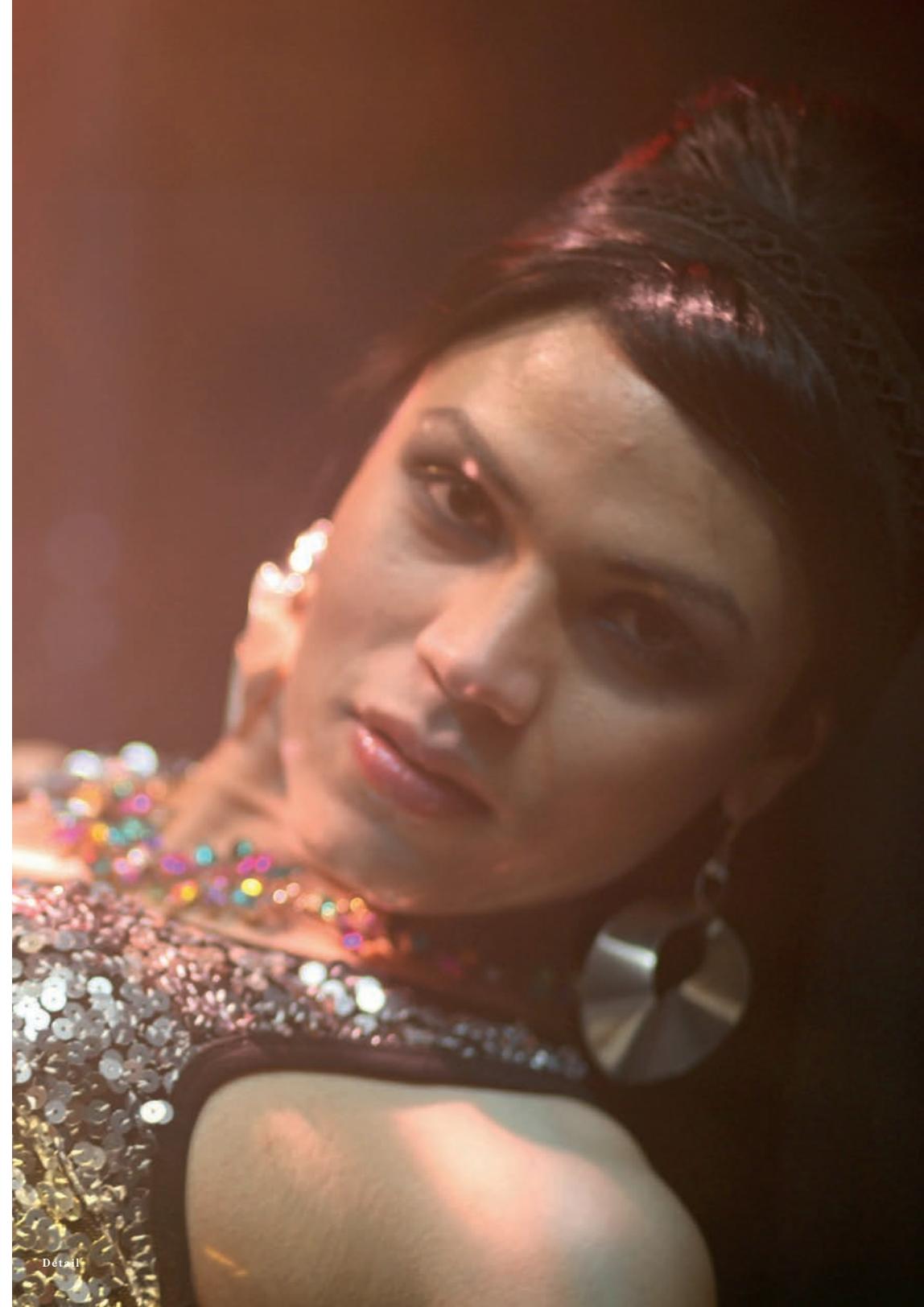
The occupation with diverse communities is exemplary for Tsang’s interest in translation processes and social marginalization operations. Who is entitled to speak, who speaks for whom? The text states “It is only when I type something in your language that you refer to me as having communication,” which addresses the right to one’s own language and the possibility of the coexistence of diverse forms of being. Tsang’s impersonation gives rise to a renewed manifesto that over and above autism becomes a universal appeal for the acceptance of each and every form of human existence, particularly those that deviate from the existing gender order.

Wu Tsang
WILDNESS, 2012
 HD, 74:00

Wu Tsang's award-winning feature film *WILDNESS* revolves around the Silver Platter bar, which has provided a home to the Latin American LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community of Los Angeles since 1963. Together with a group of friends, the DJs and music producers Total Freedom (Ashland Mines) and NGUZUNGUZU (Daniel Pineda and Asma Maroof), Tsang initiated the "Wildness" performance art parties that attracted young partygoers to the venue. The confrontation between the predominantly white middle-class creative professionals and academics with the largely Latin American queer community led to numerous conflicts that often accompany gentrification processes. The weekly party series became so popular after a while that the Silver Platter's existing clientele was forced to face a variety of challenges. It had operated until then more or less under the radar as a place of refuge for its regular guests, but it had now developed into a place with a wider public appeal. *WILDNESS* depicts this development in an urgent and sensitive manner. On the one hand, the film explores the problematic living conditions of those who had integrated the Silver Platter as a social stronghold into their everyday lives for decades. But it also conveys the sense of the trust that gradually ensued between different com-

munities that had now grown together despite palpable collisions and differing interests. The film poses questions about the importance of so-called "safe spaces." Paradoxically, it becomes apparent that marginalized people in turn marginalize others within the safe space they lay claim to as their own. Who is permitted to belong and what are they to be protected from? How does the definition of a safe space differ from person to person? How can the diverse interests and expectations in one place be made mutually advantageous?

Wu Tsang not only directed *WILDNESS* but he also depicts his own participation as the organizer of the parties and later as being involved with a legal counseling center for transgender persons. Another principle protagonist the bar itself, which, personified by the voice of the actress Mariana Marroquin, tells its own story in Spanish. By not only revealing his own involvement and, in keeping with the tradition of magic realism, leaving the viewer uncertain about the degree of fictionality within the film scenes, Tsang counters the exploitative potential of the documentary film genre. With *WILDNESS* he demonstrates his refusal to accept the demand for objectivity and integrity as regards the depiction of persons or things and manages to bring a story of existential urgency closer to a broader audience.





Wu Tsang
The Looks, 2015
 2-channel HD-video, 10:00

The Looks is the second part of a filmic epic in which Wu Tsang, in collaboration with the performer boychild, imagines a future society where the people are controlled by avatars, so-called Looks, by means of surveillance. Oriented on the present-day algorithm-based data-monitoring that is invisible for people but which actively restricts their freedom of decision and possibilities, the Looks are artificial intelligent frequencies that track the social exchanges between people via digital media and consequently dominate physical space. The film's protagonist Blis, who is played by boychild, is by day a pop star and by night a performer in an underground scene that has formed in opposition to the Looks. In the first part of the filmic narrative—the multi-channel installation *A day in the life of bliss* (2014)—Blis accidentally discovers during a nighttime raid at the club that she belongs to a minority of people who have the supernatural capacity to disturb the frequencies of the Looks and hence break their authoritarian power. Presented for the first time in conjunction with *Real Humans*, *The Looks* continues the story. The piece is a two-channel projection: The first part of the film in the quadratic Instagram like format and in the style of a trailer for a blockbuster movie opens with Blis's inner conflict between the pleasure derived from being seen and the fear of restrictive observations. The second part features a video

clip-like recording of one of Blis's stage performances to a rhythmic pop song. The material derives from a public performance put on by Wu Tsang in cooperation with boychild, commissioned by and filmed on location at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Wearing an outfit recalling marionette strings, boychild reflects in it the gesticulation of media celebrities and expresses the relationship between detachment and sensitivity within the self-representational act of the performance by means of the displayed lip-sync technique. Blis's skin is covered with silver glitter that reflects the stage show's colored lights. Not only can a spectacular effect be witnessed in which Blis seems to be connected to the current of the stage lighting but it is also a commentary on the relationship between performance and audience—her reflecting exterior underscores her position as a projection surface for the desires of her fan base.

The Looks combines both dystopia and utopia by amplifying the current danger of standardization and restrictions through an increasing technologization of the environment as well as debating the question of art as a "safe space". Can performance and filmic art that focuses on the occupation with gazes, representations and appearances offer a potential alternative in the face of a society marked by surveillance and control?

Jordan
Wolfs 



Detail from still

Jordan Wolfson
Raspberry Poser, 2012
 Projected video animation, color,
 sound, white carpet, loop, 13:54

Raspberry Poser is Jordan Wolfson's most recent video animation and as the final installment of a trilogy including *Con Leche* (2009) and *Animation, masks* (2011) it is among his central works.

In a completely white space that reflects the colors and atmosphere of the projection, the viewer is bombarded with a staggering array of associative sensory impressions, a rhythmic montage of both stimulating and disturbing images and music taken from diverse contexts and times. Overdimensioned HIV viruses bounce about in sterile furniture stores to the sound of pop music by Beyoncé, Mazzy Star and Roy Orbison; a voluminous condom filled with heart-shaped blood corpuscles float gracefully through colorful children's rooms; an irate small comic book youth massacres himself and Jordan Wolfson wanders through the streets of Paris dressed like a Punk. The

rapid succession of pictorial sequences and the insistent music creates an affective casing—the viewer is immersed in the virulent circulation of emotionally and ideologically charged signs and then emerges again through abrupt cuts in the sound track, the subsequent silence as well as being directly looked at by figures in the video. The latter is not only done to excess by the auto-destructive comic figure. The artist also looks once frontally into the camera; it is a moment when an individual address takes place and the feeling arises that one has been caught during the pleasurable act of watching. But the artist avoids making any moral judgments about the vortex-like flood of images and music:

“... I consider myself a witness to culture, not a judge. And I come from culture, I'm born into culture, the world is polluted—that pollution is inside my body, it's

Jordan Wolfson
Raspberry Poser, 2012
 Projected video animation, color,
 sound, white carpet, loop, 13:54

inside my mind, and these are the images that come out of my mind.”¹ Jordan Wolfson reanimates a world where pop cultural products are just as readily available as historical artifacts; where signs and (digital) images appear just as potent and real as persons and physical objects. This dissolution of boundaries is also reflected on a formal level in the animation. It not only namely makes it possible to set everything into motion but also to shape, deform and alienate everything at will. Even in its layout as an assemblage of diverse articles, *Raspberry Poser* makes the process of constant change, recoding and shifting in a desirous identity development tangible. Amidst all the images, goods and styles presented in a dream-like

manner, the yearning for intimacy and to belong articulates itself at the same time as does the wish for isolation and singularity.

Are they solely empty shells that cover the scornfully snorting phony or even bluffer in order to be able to assert himself in a deluded world? Or is the narcissist act of “posing” here a practice of the correlation between a person and objects, gestures and lifestyles that by all means can bring forth a self?

1 Andrew M. Goldstein, “Jordan Wolfson on Transforming the “Pollution” of Pop Culture Into Art,” http://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/jordan_wolfson_interview [last accessed: January 29, 2015]



Detail from still

alone

at midnight

Dear NOVEMBER.. Goodnight SEPTEMBER

ambition.

WANTING LOVE

WIPPED SEX

this is the hand i pack my w...
4

Socrates was an asshole!



Jordan Wolfson
 Untitled, 2014
 Inkjet print in aluminium
 artist's frame
 60^{1/8} × 50^{1/8} × 3^{1/4} inches

In a series of untitled sculptures Jordan Wolfson developed diverse cycles encompassing collaged arrangements of images in aluminum frames produced by the artist. While the frame's reflective mounting transverses the picture surface, emphasizing and highlighting the fragmentation, pictorial elements can also be found on the sides, margins and edges so that the functions of picture and frame merge.

Three of the exhibited sculptures derive from a series whose pictorial material, following on the video *Raspberry Poser*, is assembled partly from computer-generated and partly from photographs as well as slogan-like catchphrases and bumper stickers. These adhesive labels used for advertising purposes by companies or private persons to indicate a specific affiliation are affixed to car bump-

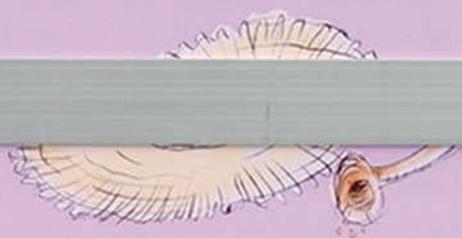
ers or in other public places. They can express preferences or a political point of view seriously or ironically. At best they represent a kind of self-representation that functions by means of a message aimed at an unspecified audience. The collaged combination of self-designed stickers, striking motifs and pop culture symbols along with meaningfully charged snippets of speech opens up a discourse on identity and subjectivization. Personalities conveyed in the fresh look of youthful obstinacy circulate here whose identity is based on the addressing of others. The accumulation of artifacts that have been disseminated throughout the world seem to result in a meaningful moment because it is only through them that the self is offered a mirror in which he can recognize himself. But a definite identity cannot be stabilized in spite of

Jordan Wolfson
 Untitled, 2014
 Inkjet print in aluminium
 artist's frame
 60 1/8 × 50 1/8 × 3 1/4 inches

the virulence and appropriation of these cultural symbols. A distinct self cannot be grasped here and the circulating signs are in danger of becoming irrelevant and interchangeable. In one of the works the burden of self-consciousness is exemplarily encapsulated pictorially: While looking rapturously at his own reflection in a mirror, the comic figure turns a gun on himself.

Two further sculptures belong to a cycle that largely depicts computer-generated facial parts in close up and overlaid with a detail of the artist's photographed hand. The varying picture quality of the material provides the viewer a haptic experience, suggesting in combination with the proportions of hand and face that it

concerns a steering towards image and likeness. It is uncertain, however, whether it involves gestures of care, affectionate devotion, meticulous inspection or brutal manipulation. Concepts such as "Love," "Pain" and "Need" stand out, as if implying they could reveal something about the plot's motivation. The relationship between hand and face as well as further aspects of the picture composition, for example the neutral facial expression, the view directed from the side out of the picture and the billowing strands of hair awaken the impression that the picture of the women was made without her knowledge. A touch of voyeurism colors the perception of these works, generating a certain amount of tension.



Accompanying program

Performance *Moved by the Motion* by Wu Tsang and boychild feat. Patrick Belaga
Saturday, February 7, 8 pm, Julia Stoschek Collection, Schanzenstraße 54, 40549 Düsseldorf

Moved by the Motion is an ongoing performative collaboration between Wu Tsang and boychild that explores different kinds of storytelling through the use of the voice, movement, and the theatrical stage that puts these elements in tension with one another. Play is a central part of the performance—both play as an activity and play as it defines a gap or space for flexibility and leeway. In *Moved by the Motion*, Tsang plays ‘the voice’—a mirage of words, cerebral and evocative—who frames the story with language. boychild plays the ‘mover’, an agent who is constantly changing—who breaks down the space/time of narrative with her physicality, expressing ineffable experiences.

“Originally, this performance grew out of our more conventional director-actor relationship when we were working on the movie—but as two performers and visual artists, we wanted to push the boundaries of power relationships and narratives using performance art. So in a sense we are “playing” with the idea of

film/theater direction, and how the voice can command different emotional responses from the performers and the audience.”—Wu Tsang

The Performance is presented by Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and Julia Stoschek Foundation e.V. Düsseldorf.

Guided tour with the curators

Thursday, March 26 and April 9, each 5 pm

Catalogue release

Sunday, April 19, 3 pm

On the occasion of the exhibition the first monographs on Ian Cheng (in conjunction with the advancement prize “Kataloge für junge Künstler” awarded by the Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach-Stiftung) and Wu Tsang (in cooperation with the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst Zürich) will be published.

Public guided tour

Every Sunday, 1.30 pm

Please find further information about our accompanying program and our workshops for children and adults here: www.kunsthalle-duesseldorf.de

This booklet is published on the occasion of the exhibition

Real Humans.

Ian Cheng, Wu Tsang, Jordan Wolfson
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Kunsthalle Düsseldorf

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