

»Open Codes?«

Exhibition in Collaboration with the ZKM Center for Art and Media,
Karlsruhe

Opening: Thursday, June 13th, 2019, 18:00

Introductions to "Open Codes?"

Guest Curator Cheryce von Xylander

Clemens Kruemmel, Curator Kunstraum

With a screening of Lawrence Lek's Film "Geomancer" (2017)

Location: Kunstraum, Campus Hall 25

Opening times: Friday, June 14th (exceptionally) as well as June 17th –
July 2nd, Mondays through Thursdays, from 11:00-18:00

The Kunstraum of the Leuphana University Lüneburg will present an adapted version of the exhibition "Open Codes" developed at the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe by Peter Weibel (curator). A selection of works is shown that explores the cultural and social ramifications of current technologies of encryption. While the ZKM took a broad approach to exploring the impact these developments have and are continuing to have on visual culture, the Lüneburg curators Cheryce von Xylander and Clemens Kruemmel assisted by students from the Master "Culture, Arts and Media" shift the satellite exhibition in the Kunstraum toward a "Digital History" reading. Current cryptological practices, so von Xylander's thesis, employ a Kantian conception of reason.

We live in a world generated, steered and controlled by data. Digital codes shape the lived present and exert a profound influence on every area of quotidian being, economic, social, cultural, political and juridical. Code-driven decision-making raises such questions as: Who is accountable for self-learning software? What is an algorithm and how can we assess it in

legal terms? What responsibility do citizens and institutions have in managing their own data? How should algorithmic processing be legislated? What does artistic reflection contribute to this social process and how does it relate to cutting edge digital technology?

The Lueneburg exhibition uses artistic tokens and utterances to interrogate vital new modes of integrating spatial, discursive and written sign systems in light of their defining historicity. The artworks featured in Lueneburg's "Open Codes?" foreground relations between spectators as well as the verbal and spatial contexts within which digital codes are assuming tactile traction. This curatorial re-presentation draws on two defining moments of contemporary artistic practice, namely the installation and the interactive – and asserts a synchronic logic against the prevailing, diachronic imaginary of the digital. The "Open Codes" trailer asks how these articulative idioms are themselves shaped by the very technological developments – most notably, computer-assisted graphic design and artificial intelligence – under investigation in the ZKM exhibition.

On entering the Kunstraum of the Leuphana, visitors are welcomed by an interactive screen that is part of the work "Style Transfer" (2018) by artists Boris Neubert, Chengzhi Wu and Max Piochowiak. Automated filters instantly rebrush the vertical camera image into successively changing graphic textures, drawing on operative aesthetic conventions of the contemporary net world such as Instagram or Snapchat. With the help of "Deep Neural Network" technologies, these renderings are generated so rapidly that an impression of absolute synchronicity arises. Like a bygone mirror cabinet at a fairground, recalling the spectacular distortion of the visitors' image that caused incredulous amazement at the time, "Style Transfer" not only astonishes but also evokes the breathtaking speed of visual transformation typical of today's imaging techniques. At the same time, the installation denotes the colorful and dazzling surfaces that conceal the "new" uncanniness of digitality.

"Column 1-0" (2016/17) by the artist Solimán López presents the full-scale color print of a computer-generated column suspended from the ceiling, in the middle of which the animated sequence of its own digital coding is projected. This work relies on the encounter of an architectural super-sign of traditional European architecture with its translation into binary code, which is no longer "readable" by humans, an encounter intentionally aestheticized as a conflict. Its peculiarity lies in the accessibility and intuitive comprehensibility of the dynamic relationship between the concepts of language, space and coding that it represents, a juxtaposition continuous with pre-digital experiences.

In Koen Vanmechelen's "Book of Genome PCC / Decode - PCC" (2016) a completely different kind of translation is in play – one reliant on symbolic and performative appropriation. With the genome code sequence of a chicken printed in book form, the unfathomably long string of characters is first transferred to a seemingly familiar vehicle of knowledge transmission – notably, the book – only to be taken ad absurdum by means of the spectacle projected on an adjacent screen. The endurance performance by readers from diverse linguistic and cultural contexts exposes a gap in understanding that pervades our digital present, the striking rift between traditional and new code languages shaping the boundaries of human individuation.

The module that belongs to the computer-based installation "Alphabet Space" (2017) by Adam Słowik, Christian Loelkes and Peter Weibel, which is derived from an open cube with missing edges, literally puts a code-generating tool into the hands of visitors. This makes the "Digital Divide" of historical and contemporary modes of experience immediately tangible. Already, the original cube sculpture created by Słowik could be rotated and turned in such a way that a light source projected every letter of the alphabet in sequential shadows, legible, on a wall. This module may have its historical references in the "Incomplete Open Cubes" of the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt or in the cube permutations of computer graphics pioneer

Manfred Mohr. Yet, in its current form, the boundaries between artistic-sculptural and design-technical-functional effects blur. Peter Weibel's extension of this letter-casting tool plumbs the contemporary space of "digital shadows" – his concept, implemented by Christian Loelkes, turns the module into a user interface with the help of a built-in gyroscope, through which the manipulation movements of the users can be sent wirelessly to a computer screen and become an alphabetical string of characters – and, ultimately, a readable text. The intuitive physical interaction of the users with the module and the screen turns into a dance, a writing performance in space.

The installation "XML - SVG Code - Quellcode des Ausstellungsraums" (2010/2019) by Karin Sander renders the floor as a specific part of the architecture of the Kunstraum in code translation. This piece captures the measurements of the floor slab, corners and indentations included, in the source code that provides the basis for digital renderings in contemporary architectural practice. The exact code is spelled out as adhesive foil plots. It covers the floor, which forms part of the architectural environment and could, in principle, be recreated from these signs. The inscription layer mounts a surface but also functions as an element of the art space to be traversed – the habitat emerges as a product of the system of numbers and signs.

Finally, Lawrence Lek's film "Geomancer", shown on the occasion of the opening, presents complex architectural interiors and endless drone flights through capitalist offshore casino and megacity architectures in a series of advanced computer graphic animations. Their digital rationality is analyzed and reflected by a constant critical narration from the off, which simultaneously opens a nuanced path of interpretation to the economic, political and individual risks of today's digital global economies.

The Lueneburg articulation of "Open Codes" draws on an artistic conception of the challenges that today's wholesale codification poses for

any acculturated workings of reason. In so doing, the exhibition partakes of the historical rupture marked by Kant's writings and occasioning a revolution in cognitive conditioning. In its curatorial re-conception, "Open Codes?" revolves around Kant's essay "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" (1786). A single lexical replacement suffices for the text to read like an instruction manual for digital autonomy in the age of pervasive networking: "What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Cyberspace?" With this editorial wink, Kant's philosophical deliberations acquire a surprisingly contemporary ring. The historical essay seems equally to refract and to anticipate our current, online condition – a condition to which Kant's writings, so the argument goes, materially contributed. A final, but critical, editorial intervention updates the admittedly outmoded courtesies in Kant's essay, to align them with conventions of the 21st century:

"Men, Women and LGBTQ+ of broad mind and heightened mental capacities! I adore your talents and cherish your feeling for humanity. But have you considered, thoroughly, the risks you are taking and where your attacks on reason will land you? No doubt, you wish to insure the sustainability of free thinking without offense; for without this, even your free-wheeling flights of genius would soon come crashing down [...] And so, freedom of thought, insofar it is determined to operate against the laws of reason, will finally destroy itself."

To be sure, the conflation of Kant with digitality in the context of "Open Codes?" has neither a normative nor an affirmative purpose. Serious charges have been raised against the Enlightenment tradition generally and its most prominent German exponent specifically. This moral legacy has yet to be probed for the full measure of undoubtedly sexist, classicist, racist and Eurocentric content. A contemporary reading of this scripture has yet to be proffered.¹ Beyond the canon, however, Kant's theoretical system found immediate, technical application with lasting impact on posterity. It goes without saying that neither he nor his contemporaries

had access to portable electronic devices. For all we know, none of his peers anticipated the rise of a multi-tasking cellular butler resembling the smartphone. Nonetheless, a searchable information-sphere à la Google, Bing, Baidu etc. is, for Kant, the very emblem of the loss of autonomy that he would spend his intellectual efforts attempting to correct. As he says in "What is Enlightenment?" (1784):

"If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all."

Kant achieved significant insight with regard to understanding the conditions under which understanding comes to be configured. Von Xylander's heterodox claim that Kant contributed, substantively, to the transformation of our daily doings through new media, which urges a diachronic reading of the latter's historicity, has yet to be interrogated.

The cognitive paradigm he formulated was prescient and is, as such, deserving of thorough-going scholarly and artistic attention. However, this much is clear: In his eponymous publication of 1781, Kant not only rendered pure reason as an emergent phenomenon, he also strove to convey the "mechanical" and "heuristic" constituents of reasoned activity. His critical philosophy developed the notion of "self-organization" and coined that modern sounding term to name the developmental dynamic in question². Kant commented, explicitly, on artificial intelligence.

Conspicuously, he witnessed overwrought debates concerning the chess-playing automaton being paraded, in his day, through the courts of Europe – the fabled "Mechanical Turk" – and predicted the rise of future intelligent systems comprised of human-machine mergers. It so happens that Amazon's Mechanical Turk radically realizes the eclipse of transcendental freedom against which Kant strove so urgently to immunize posterity³. Said Mechanical Turk refers to an online, bookable, service delivery that monetizes subjective labor; it subjugates the human

sensorium to the instrumental ends of algorithmic optimization and, in so doing, boosts computational efficacy with commodified increments of aggregated discriminatory judgement.

The Kunstraum version of "Open Codes" mounts a fractal display of the scholarly and artistic conditions of contemporary thought within the codified and multi-modal public sphere we have come to inhabit. While the ZKM exhibition aimed to serve as a forum for public sphere and civico-aesthetic activation, Leuphana's "Open Codes?" spin-off traces this ambition to Kant's programmatic philosophy. What unites these two endeavors is a tentative faith in reason.

After the showing in the Kunstraum of the Leuphana University, "Open Codes" will travel to Shanghai and Mumbai.

Open Codes, ZKM Karlsruhe

Peter Weibel (curator)

Open Codes?, Kunstraum Leuphana University Lueneburg

Clemens Kruemmel and Cheryce von Xylander (co-curators)
with participation of the students of the Master's seminar „Exhibiting
Digitality in ‚Open Codes‘ and in other Contexts,“ directed by Clemens
Kruemmel and Cheryce von Xylander

Organization / Institution

Leuphana University Lueneburg and ZKM | Center for Art and Media
Karlsruhe

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by IGTech GmbH, Hamburg.

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the exhibition's daily operation at the Leuphana

¹Cf. the lecture by Susan Neiman, „Was tun Kantianer in Nicht-Kantischen Zeiten?“, May 29th 2019 at the Conference „Immanuel Kant 1724—2024. Ein europäischer Denker“, Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften: Berlin.

²Volker Gerhardt, Selbstbestimmung. Das Prinzip der Individualität, 2. expanded edition. Stuttgart: Reclams-Universalbibliothek: 2018, pp. 153-189.

³Simon Schaffer, „Enlightened Automata“, in: William Clark, Jan Golinski and Simon Schaffer (eds.), The Sciences in Enlightened Europe. Chicago: Chicago University Press: 1999, pp. 126-165.