

UNIVERSITY OF
PITTSBURGH

MARCH 25,
2022

HAA GRADUATE
SYMPOSIUM

Virtual Matters



SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

8:45-9:00am: Virtual coffee

9:00-9:15am: Welcome, Ellen Larson

9:15-9:45am: Keynote, Barbara London

9:45-10:45am: **Panel 1 ACTIVATED VIRTUALITIES**

Jori Snels, University of Amsterdam

"The in-between-space: Reimaginings of virtual being in aaajiao's + Lu Yang's videogame art"

Sarah Myers, Stony Brook University

"When a Black Man's Blue: HBO's: Watchmen and the Draw of the Alternate History Genre"

Frederica Simmons, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

"Ephemeral Movements: Mapping Anti-Racist Protest Art"

10:45-11:15am: Alison, Langmead, Faculty Respondent + Audience Q&A

11:15-11:30am: Break

11:30am-12:30pm: **Panel 2 VIRTUAL PRACTICALITIES**

Luise Mörke, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

"Insubstantial Actualities: The digital and the analogue in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Memoria* (2021)"

Gene Anthony Santiago-Holt, University of Delaware

"Noise, Performance, and Puerto Rican (Taino) Futurism"

Xiaofan Wu, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

"A Live Stream that May Last for Years"

12:30-1:00pm: Josh Ellenbogen, Faculty Respondent + Audience Q&A

1:00-2:00pm: Break

2:00-2:40pm: **Panel 3 - GEOSPATIAL BORDERS**

Cindy Evans, Florida State University

"Frieder Nake and the Ethics of Cold War Computer Art"

Clara Royer Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

"Allocating the Bandwidth: Slow-Scan and the New World Information Order (1978-1990)"

2:40-3:10pm: Jennifer Josten, Faculty Respondent + Audience Q&A

3:10-3:30pm: Break

3:30-4:30pm: **Panel 4 - FUTURISTIC REALITIES**

Isaiah Bertagnolli, University of Pittsburgh

"More Human than Human": Virtual Humanisms in the Blade Runner Universe"

Sophia Salinas, Southern Methodist University

"Cyber Touch: The Body and Transgression in Cyberfeminist Art Practices"

Cory Wayman, University of Utah

"She Lies, She Cries: Currencies of Affect, Beauty & Performance
in Leah Rachel's Curious Female Casting Couch (2017)"

4:30-5:00pm: Terry Smith, Faculty Respondent + Audience Q&A

5:00-5:15pm: Closing remarks, Ellen Larson

SPEAKER BIOS AND ABSTRACTS

Isaiah Bertagnolli, University of Pittsburgh

Isaiah Bertagnolli is a third year PhD student in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Pittsburgh. His research focuses on art and the antinuclear movement of the 1970s and 1980s across the Pacific. He is interested in the ways 20th century science fiction captured nuclear anxieties.

“More Human than Human’: Virtual Humanisms in the World of *Blade Runner*”

In October 2021, the Facebook Company announced its rebranding as Meta Platforms, Incorporated. Beyond online social platforms, Meta’s new technology promises a world of augmented reality where the real and the virtual have been fused together. This technology has been imagined before and it is a mainstay in the science fiction genre. Yet, perhaps nowhere has the technology been more breathtakingly rendered than in the *Blade Runner* universe. First imagined in Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel *Do Android’s Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and further brought to life by Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) and Denis Villeneuve’s sequel *Blade Runner: 2049* (2017), *Blade Runner* presents a future marred by rampant pollution and ecological collapse. A future where space colonization is a project of eugenics made possible by slavery, and the omnipresent technologies of a single corporation have abolished the lines between the real and the virtual altogether. This paper engages the original novel with the two films and examines the ways that virtual and augmented realities are central to both maintaining social order and to an inter-planetary economy. To do so, I parse out the world building suggested by the films’ visuals and consider the technologies such as bioengineered Replicants, holographic AI living companions, and artificial memory implants as virtual and augmented realities. Thinking about these three categories in such terms allows this paper to explore the deeper philosophical questions posed by the *Blade Runner* universe. Chief among them: What does it mean to be human?

Cindy Evans, Florida State University

Cindy Evans is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Art History at Florida State University. She is an art historian of modern and global contemporary art with special interests in postwar art in Germany and the Balkans and a focus on social art history and cultural geopolitics.

“Frieder Nake and the Ethics of Cold War Computer Art”

In 1971, amid global Cold War tensions, artist Frieder Nake published his provocative essay, “There should be no more computer art,” in the Computer Arts Society bulletin, where he described computers as “big machinery, still surrounded by mystic clouds” and their use in artistic production as, “ridiculous.” Paradoxically, a few years earlier Nake, a pioneer of early computer art, participated in the groundbreaking computer arts

exhibitions *Cybernetic Serendipity* (1968) and *New Tendencies 4 Computers and Visual Research* (1968–1969). These exhibitions emerged as part of avant-garde activities like the New Tendencies movement based in Yugoslavia that valorized the revolutionary economic and cultural potential of merging experimental art and burgeoning technologies. These exhibitions blurred boundaries between artists, scientists, and engineers by displaying a conglomeration of artistic works produced by humans and computers to evaluate the viability of art as visual research for its aesthetic and social potential. Despite early enthusiasm for the computer as a tool for artistic production, some artists, like Nake would eventually denounce them as tools for annihilation and oppression. Today, computers have penetrated nearly every aspect of economic and social activity obscuring our modern understanding of Cold War era computer arts, a time punctuated by anxiety over technological destruction and planned obsolescence. This paper contextualizes Nake’s altered position regarding computer arts in the Cold War to assert that his disavowal was in reaction to contemporaneous sociopolitical perspectives like neo-Marxism and Marcusean attitudes on art and the culture industry.

Luise Mörke, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Luise Mörke studied art history at UC Berkeley, École Normale Supérieure and EHESS in Paris, as well as Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where she is currently completing an MA. While focused on film, her research and writing participates in interdisciplinary cultural criticism. She has worked for the Berlin International Film Festival and contributes essays and short fiction to publications such as *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Photogénie*, *Senses of Cinema*, and *MUBI notebook*.

“Sci-Fi Syndrome. CGI and the analogue in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Memoria* (2021)”

This paper focuses on Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s most recent feature *Memoria*, which revolves around Jessica, a British expat in Colombia who is troubled by a mysterious bang that no one else can hear. Like its protagonist, *Memoria* exists within two (technological) worlds: the film is shot on 35 mm, while its rich sound scape is recorded and mixed digitally. In addition, a single CGI-animated frame pushes the film—up to this point suffused with indigenous mythology and myths of indigeneity—into the futuristic realm of Science Fiction. “Sci-Fi Syndrome” argues that Weerasethakul posits digital sounds and images as unfettered signifiers that cannot be traced back to an origin. Unlike the simultaneously released *Dune*, *Memoria* refuses to utilize Science Fiction in the service of allegory. This “just-thatness” of both digital image and sound points to the absences at the center of the film, the most glaring of which are colonialism and resource extraction. These themes haunt *Memoria* like the bang that cannot be referred to as anything other than itself and is therefore all the more alienating to bear.

Sarah Myers, Stony Brook University

Sarah Myers is an art historian and curator. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Art History at Stony Brook University. Her scholarship focuses on global contemporary art and American art since the 1980s.

“When a Black Man’s Blue: HBO’s: *Watchmen* and the Draw of the Alternate History Genre”

Dating back to the infamous 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, the American psyche has proven to be susceptible and responsive to alternate histories. Americans have remained engrossed in the genre, evidenced by the binge-worthy rate at which dramas such as *Man in the High Castle* and *Handmaid’s Tale* are being consumed. This paper considers the iconographic potency of the *Watchmen* series in the current political landscape of the US. To consider how *Watchmen* adapts the dual traditions of the superhero and alternate history genre through the lens of racism in America, this paper utilizes theories of Black iconicity and decolonial methodologies of justice. Critical race theory provides a framework for assessing the role of violence in *Watchmen* as representing Black power dialectically. The series begins with the 1921 Tulsa Massacre as a nexus point from which to reimagine the development of the justice system in the United States. *Watchmen* uses the superhero figure—traditionally archetypes of white morality—to apply pressure to hegemonic perceptions of policing and violence. Taking cues from a long history of Afro-futurism and a shorter history of the Black superhero, *Watchmen* utilizes the tools of science fiction to practice a form of liberation by imagining a future where Black power dominates white supremacy. Consumers of these alternate history television series are engaging in a thought experiment that fictionalizes and narrativizes elemental questions regarding justice, power, and law. Within the context of the recent centennial of the Tulsa Massacre, the rise of alt-right vigilantism, the January 6th Insurrection, and the Defund the Police movement, *Watchmen* considers the role of agency in the series as a blueprint for navigating our current nexus point in American politics.

Clara Royer Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

Clara M. Royer is a first-year Ph.D. candidate in Art History at Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne. She recently completed her Dual MA in Modern and Contemporary Art at Columbia University and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

“Allocating the Bandwidth: Slow-Scan and the New World Information Order (1978-1990)”

In the late 1970s, the quest for interactive communication and struggle for mainstream media access encouraged artists’ interest in Slow-Scan Television (SSTV), an early form of videophone and prominent example of alternative

telecommunication technology. This apparatus fostered the domestication of distances and the elimination of all limitations on the circulation of images, heralding the advent of a virtual network of iconic information that quickly met with the prescriptive material framework of the frequency spectrum. At the same time, artists’ experimentations with SSTV became guided by an anxiety regarding the privatization, commodification, and militarization of the bandwidth, thus signaling a shift from the techno-utopianism of the 1960s media arts community to the critical and operative understanding of technology by the avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s. This presentation proposes to critically examine media artists’ resistance to the market-based information world order in the late 1970s through an analysis of critics and artists Lisa Béar and Willoughby Sharp’s 1979 *WARC Report*. Covering the World Administrative Radio Conference (WARC), this series denounced the unfair division of the frequency spectrum between world leaders and echoed developing countries’ demand for a comprehensive reallocation of the spectrum, for the fashioning a New World Information Order (NWIO). Anticipating critics of the gathering of power that is today made visible with digital trusts, Béar and Sharp’s experimentations with SSTV aroused issues concerning elitism, cultural imperialism, and what media theorist Herbert Schiller has named “electronic colonialism.”

Sophia Salinas, Southern Methodist University

Sophia Salinas is a Ph.D. student in the Rhetorics of Art, Space and Culture program in art history at Southern Methodist University. Her research interests include modern and contemporary art with attention to themes of gender, race, and embodiment, as well as new media art.

“Cyber Touch: The Body and Transgression in Cyberfeminist Art Practices”

At the turn of the millennium the Cyberfeminist movement interrogated the relationship between gender and emergent technologies, producing a wide breadth of interdisciplinary scholarship. However, the contributions of Cyberfeminist artists and art collectives remain under-discussed in greater coverage of the movement, despite the inextricable role of art and visual culture within Cyberfeminist mobilization. While scholarship produced by major Cyberfeminist collectives examines the political aesthetics of futurity, much of the available art historical literature on Cyberfeminist art practices takes a chronological approach, limiting exploration of thematic continuities across this inherently pluralistic and inconsistent movement. This presentation will focus upon thematic insights which transcend collective affiliation, country of origin, and artistic approach. Placing the artwork of collective VNS Matrix in conversation with the later art of Linda Dement, Shu Lea Cheang, and Prema Murthy, I will investigate how Cyberfeminist interactive art practices repeat and reinterpret “cyber touch,” or touch which transgresses the digital frontier through theoretical cyborgian extensions of the organic being.

Cyberfeminist digital art practices have utilized their interactive potential to transcend the boundary between physical touch and cyber incorporeality, focusing on three transgressive aspects of technoculture: the avatar, cybersex, and cyberviolence. Studying how each of these facets reveal differing preoccupations with digital embodiment, I will highlight artistic contributions to the greater theoretical movement of Cyberfeminism and parallels with other strands of contemporary art and technoculture.

Gene Anthony Santiago-Holt, University of Delaware

Gene Anthony Santiago-Holt is a multimedia artist from Philadelphia. He creates drawings, and papier-mâché masks that function as props, and as alter-egos for his improvised video performances. His heavily processed videos incorporate original audio and found imagery including childhood photographs, pop-culture references, as well as religious iconography to reconcile his mixed heritage.

“Noise, Performance, and Puerto Rican (Taino) Futurism”

Gene Anthony Santiago-Holt (AKA MOYOGASH) will present “Noise, Performance, and Puerto Rican (Taino) Futurism” a presentation of artwork made in the past year that intertwines noise, performance, animation, and handmade objects showcasing the multimedia approach to their art making. This talk will give the audience an insight into the artist’s perspective and creative process. Long buried in a cave in the Bahamas and then recently discovered were the skeletal remains of an indigenous woman whose DNA showed relations to the Arawak Native American tribe. Comparison of the genomes to modern day Caribbean people and Caribbean descendants revealed that contemporary Puerto Ricans are closely related to the long-thought ‘extinct’ Taino. In fact, a 2020 *New York Times* article stated that roughly 14% of the Puerto Rican population has native Taino ancestry. This lecture will give insight into a personal perspective of what it’s like to be mixed race and how it relates to their art practice, as well as presenting findings of ancestral trauma that relates to colonization of the Caribbeans, and specifically US imperialism over Puerto Rico.

Frederica Simmons, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota

Frederica Simmons is a Black American curator, scholar, and museum worker uplifting frequently overlooked narratives in pursuit of racial, gender, and sexual equity in art history. She has been the Curatorial Assistant to the Department of European Art at the Minneapolis Institute of Art since 2019.

“Ephemeral Movements: Mapping Protest Art in the Black Lives Matter Movement”

Protest street art actively works to engender empathy within the hearts and minds of the public as it establishes a visual confrontation and reminder of the consequence that institutionalized racism holds for Black bodies. The opposing force to war is not

peace, but creation, particularly as it exists at the intersections of art production and community engagement. The Urban Art Mapping Project seeks to make permanent the otherwise ephemeral street art that the city would prefer to keep hidden. The UAM Project’s Urban Art Mapping George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art database seeks to document street art from around the world created in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and as part of an ongoing movement demanding social justice and equality. Informed by cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s call for the archive to be “not an inert museum of dead works, but a ‘living archive,’ whose construction must be seen as an ongoing, never-completed project” (89-92), our team has understood our work in building the George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art Database as activist work that can help contribute to dismantling white supremacy. This archive is a repository for images made available for research and education. The meta-data allows for an analysis of the themes and issues that appear in street art, explored in relation to local experiences, responses, and attitudes. Given the global scope of this archive and the extremely ephemeral nature of art and writing in the streets, crowd-sourcing is essential to the expansion of this project.

Jori Snels, University of Amsterdam

Jori Snels is a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam. She researches how contemporary Chinese digital art represents and reimagines opportunities and challenges of life in a digital society. Her work has been published in *World Art*, *Art and the Public Sphere*, and *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*.

“The in-between-space: Reimaginings of virtual being in aaajiao’s + Lu Yang’s videogame art”

In the videogame artwork *Deep Simulator* (2020) by artist aaajiao, the player at a certain point asks: “So, this is really the world after death?” To which a monstrous figure called Totem answers: “You can say so, but to be more precise, this is only the ‘in-between-space.’” The in-between-space here refers to both the space that one occupies between death and rebirth according to Buddhist philosophy, as well as to a space that connects the physical world to the virtual world. In Lu Yang’s videogame artwork *The Great Adventure of Material World Knight* (2019), the player does not remain in the space between death and rebirth but travels through an entire cycle of reincarnation. Similar to *Deep Simulator*, the game prompts the player to consider the ontologies of virtual and physical subjects to be flexible and fluid. I will analyze how *Deep Simulator* and *The Great Adventure of Material World Knight* mediate and reimagine the ontology of the virtual and its implications for the ontology of the human subject. I will specifically focus on how these artworks employ the video game’s unique affordances for world building as a tool to express ideas about the fluidity of being, and how those ideas are rooted in Buddhist philosophy. I will study these works using visual and discourse analysis and a post-human theoretical framework.

Cory Wayman, University of Utah

Cory Wayman holds an Honors Bachelor of Arts in Art History and a Bachelor's of Science in Sociology and is currently completing his MA in Contemporary Art History at the University of Utah. His research focuses on the body and sexuality in culture and social histories of art exhibition.

“She Lies, She Cries: The Currencies of Affect, Beauty & Performance in Leah Rachel’s *Curious Female Casting Couch*”

Writer, show-runner and filmmaker Leah Rachel explores intersections of identity, virtual economies and affectual labor in her web-video-project *Curious Female Casting Couch*, or *CFCC* (2017). Produced in an L.A. County adult entertainment studio, *CFCC* features videos of four women interviewing for alleged opportunities in the pornography industry with pixelated male “producers” who coax them to offer increasingly intimate details and feelings on-camera. The Curious women perform the role of “amateurs” in ways which illuminate exploitative patterns in Hollywood as well as market-favored “professional” behavior of service-industry-workers under global capitalism. Created for upload on the popular site Pornhub, *CFCC* was ultimately removed by the company’s content-monitors. This project examines the series from dual historical and social perspectives: first, through art historical lineages of new media art and artist engagement with archetypes of the sex worker, and second, through its intended framework on Pornhub and the conventions of the casting-couch internet genre. Engaging *CFCC* using media and critical frameworks proposed by artists and cultural producers, this project aims at illuminating virtual concepts of professional, gender and sexual identity by examining overlaps and between concepts of affectual labor in *CFCC* and those put forth in earlier performance works such as Marina Abramović’s *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser’s *Untitled* (2003). *CFCC*’s experiments with identity construction question how the increasingly virtual marketplaces of today are both impacting and shaped by histories of the intellectual authority of female artists and those participating in sex work’s virtual, affectual and physical spaces.

Xiaowu Fan, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University

Xiaofan Wu graduated with a BA in Art History from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and an MA in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She focuses on contemporary Chinese art during the 1990s.

“Repetition/Elimination: Zhang Peili’s *A Live Stream that May Last for Years*”

On February 11, 2021, Chinese video artist Zhang Peili released his new work, *A Live Stream that May Last for Years* on a Chinese video sharing platform. As its title suggests, the work is ongoing and its end is undetermined. The artist fixed the video camera at a raised perspective in an anonymous place, speculatively a small town, with a Chinese national flag in focus and mountains in the background. This presentation briefly introduces its platform, “bilibili,” which is unfamiliar to most non-Chinese audiences. Then, it argues that although it adopts live-streaming as medium, this work embodies the key features of Zhang’s previous video works. As a pioneer of video art in China, Zhang has experimented with video since the late 1980s. His video works are mostly non-narrative and characterized by an unchanging repetitiveness, which is also explicit in *A Live Stream*. In addition, the presentation discusses the work’s audience engagement, which is a key feature of live stream and of the platform, and how it impacts the artwork’s authorship. More importantly, against the backdrop of contemporary China, live streaming embraces consumerist connotations as it has become a significant marketing tool that has even gained official support. From farmers to ethnic minorities, many have live streamed e-commerce to both demonstrate and sell products, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. By contrast, Zhang’s *A Live Stream* ironically critiques such consumerism. In addition, the boredom within in the work eliminates the entertaining nature of live streaming today.



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