

Helmhaus Zürich
14 February–6 April 2014

!Mediengruppe Bitnik – Delivery for Mr. Assange Christian Waldvogel – unknown

Gazing into outer space and gazing into the space of a room. Two exhibitions at Helmhaus Zürich, devoted to the Zurich collective !Mediengruppe Bitnik and the Zurich-based artist Christian Waldvogel, perform this, respectively. Each through their own distinctive lens: on the second floor !Mediengruppe Bitnik has sent a so-called “post drone” with a camera eye into one of the most closely guarded rooms in the world, which has been the home to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange for the past one and a half years. Christian Waldvogel confronts us with another form of space: the surface of a primeval planet on which life will emerge in the course of the exhibition.

Both shows provide access to spaces that we ordinarily visit only in our imaginations. They also tell the stories that belong to those spaces: !Mediengruppe Bitnik’s story is thoroughly global and recounted as rapidly as unfolding events in the wake of the NSA revelations. Christian Waldvogel tells a universal story, unfolding so slowly that it cannot be told in the course of one exhibition.

“Delivery for Mr. Assange” and “unknown” are two independent shows at Helmhaus both based on the artistic strategy of using – and abusing – technology and the incorporation of their expertise in non-art fields into their art projects. Christian Waldvogel (b. 1971) is an artist known for his involvement in the sciences. Using scientific findings from a variety of fields, he explores the possible existence of planets as inhabitable as ours and, in turn, applies the artistic insights gleaned from these studies to our earthly reality. Since 2011 the artist has been co-chair of the Topical Team Arts & Science at ESA, European Space Agency. Several events during the exhibition will include talks by scientists: microbiologist Judith Blom will speak on 1 March 2014, astrophysicist Ben Moore on 19 March 2014.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik (consisting of Carmen Weisskopf, b. 1976, and Domagoj Smoljo, b. 1979, and their two accomplices, London filmmaker and researcher Adnan Hadzi and reporter Daniel Ryser) pull all the stops to exploit – and subvert – the omnipresent technological potential of our day and age. As Internet artist of the first generation, the collective has long worked with the utopian potential of the web, but also its less utopian workings of surveillance: for example, by strolling through a city and tapping into the wireless signals of surveillance cameras in order to survey the surveillants. Thanks to whistleblower Edward Snowden’s revelations, Internet artists must now come to terms with the fact that their working arena is subject to total anti-utopian surveillance – or boldly confront it, like !Mediengruppe Bitnik at the Helmhaus. Whose project, incidentally, also belies the recent criticism that art has not addressed the NSA affair.

On 8 March 2014 !Mediengruppe Bitnik will speak with other artists about the potential of art under total surveillance.

First floor
Christian Waldvogel – unknown

Foyer:

Über den anschaulichen Inhalt der quantentheoretischen Kinematik und Mechanik.
(The Actual Content of Quantum Theoretical Kinematics and Mechanics) / Le berceau
du temps, 2014

Christian Waldvogel begins his history of worlds by reformulating Werner Heisenberg's text about the actual content of quantum theoretical kinematics and mechanics, published in 1927. Starting with a spiral, he has randomly printed all of the letters and formulas in the text on a pane of glass. This work is seen on the wall in the Helmhaus foyer. The physicist Heisenberg is known for defining the uncertainty principle, according to which the state and location of a particle cannot be conclusively measured since the measuring itself changes those parameters. This uncertainty principle comes into play shortly after the Big Bang: because the quantum effects, that is the physical effects of these particles, were decisive, and these effects cannot be measured according to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the situation shortly after the origin of the universe remains – and will always be – undefinable. That explains the “unknown” in the title Waldvogel chose for his exhibition.

Waldvogel now causes us to reformulate and apply the uncertainty principle to a work of art. By looking at a work, we change it through our pre-knowledge and opinions. In this case something happens to the work literally as well: the traditionally framed wall-mounted picture is actually a light box with two different states whose changes can never be anticipated, because they follow a randomized algorithm. On one hand, the artist is simulating our view of the universe after the Big Bang, who certainly will forever elude us because of the uncertainty principle. On the other hand, science is being introduced within the framework of art, a strategy that Waldvogel pursues undeterred, and which turns this first work into an introduction into his own story of the worlds.

Small gallery to the right:

RPPM (Random Planet Production Machine), 2013

On the basis of a Random Positioning Machine (RPM) devised to simulate zero gravity, Christian Waldvogel has developed an RPPM, a Random Planet Production Machine: operated by engines similar to those that work very well in Mars rovers, the random steering of their movements creates spherical models of planets out of drippings from candles made by the artist himself in a very complicated process. While the work in the foyer refers to a theory by Heisenberg, Waldvogel is now referring to Giordano Bruno, the Italian philosopher and astronomer, who was burned in the year 1600 because he believed that there were untold worlds like the Earth. Waldvogel uses artistic means to support this thesis. The random movements of his Planet Production Machine are able to produce perfectly round bodies – new worlds. Instead of a Big Bang, we hear only the low-key coming of the high-tech engines. The result – spherical heavenly bodies – is the same. However, the artist's machine would have to run a great deal longer than it can in the Helmhaus in order to produce as many worlds as believed by astrophysicists to be out there. There are 10 billion planets that could potentially be to the same conditions that apply to planet Earth – in other words, 10 billion earths, more than one for every person on our planet.

Christian Waldvogel and curator Daniel Morgenthaler are organizing a 5 o'clock thesis on this subject with the astrophysicist Ben Moore on 19 March 2014.

Large gallery:

Antecedents (Culture of Cyanobacteria), 2014

In the large gallery of the Helmhaus, Christian Waldvogel changes the narrative perspective of his world history from the macrolevel of entire planets to the microlevel of miniscule living matter on the surface of a still young planet (for example, the Earth three billion years ago): the entire gallery floor is covered with a primal soup consisting of nutrient broth, like that used in experiments at the Institute of Plant Biology at the University of Zurich. During the exhibition, algae-like cyanobacteria will be growing there. They are extremely resistant organisms that can survive the impact of meteorites. Because they convert carbon dioxide into oxygen, they also ensure that the atmosphere of a planet is viable for organisms like ours. In this respect, they are actually our very first forefathers – our “Antecedents”.

Visitors will move about in a glass-encased room in order to prevent contaminating the experiment. They will perceive the process of growth through the increasing intensity of colours in the nutrient pool. In the beginning, the concentration of cyanobacteria is still limited, and the liquid correspondingly colourless. In time, the proliferation of the organisms will turn the pool a bluish green – a floor painting, weekly renewed by cyanobacteria.

Small gallery to the left:

Planetarium (Armillary Sphere), 2013

Christian Waldvogel, who has already narrated his way through space, time and outer space at a number of exhibitions at home and abroad, once again changes perspective for the conclusion of his history of worlds in the third gallery. The focus moves away from the global view of the surface of a single planet to embrace the entire universe: a monumental planetarium in which the planets generated in the first room will be placed in orbit as they materialize. Like the primordial broth in the large gallery, this chapter of Waldvogel’s story will have progressed, but will be far from finished by the time the exhibition closes.

Second floor

!Mediengruppe Bitnik – Delivery for Mr. Assange

First-floor foyer, second-floor foyer:

Delivery for Mr. Rajab, 2014, Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2014

In these photographs, !Mediengruppe Bitnik provide an insight into a working instrument that kept them on their toes for the entire past year: in January 2013, the collective built and sent a “post drone” to WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, x-rays of which are pictured here: a parcel with a cell phone camera attached to the inside that took pictures through a hole in the cardboard and uploaded them on a public website every 15 seconds. Edward Snowden’s NSA disclosures have drastically revealed that there is no such thing anymore as unsurveyed and unfiltered communication – unless something is sent the supposedly old-fashioned way, that is by snail mail. !Mediengruppe Bitnik took advantage of the fact that a secrecy act is still in place for conventionally mailed letters and parcels. Their “post drone” represents one of the last surviving forms of uncompromised communication with one of the arguably most intensely surveyed people in the world.

In October 2013, Julian Assange sent a second package to the human rights activist Nabeel Rajab, who is incarcerated in Bahrain for his online criticism of the King of Bahrain. Although the “post drone” never reached its destination, it has fulfilled its purpose as a metaphor for the invisible and physically intangible movements of digital communication networks – and for the surveillance of their neuralgic hotspots by powerful protagonists. In their first major exhibition in Zurich since “Opera Calling” at Cabaret Voltaire in 2007 – where the collective provided free telephone access to the Opera House in Zurich – !Mediengruppe Bitnik have occupied the rooms in the Helmhaus to implement a physical rendition of this

mailable metaphor. We see what whistleblowers like Edward Snowden theoretically spread – but only artists are able to give that message tangible, haptic shape.

The journey of both parcels has been detailed in the publication *Delivery for Mr. Assange*. Daniel Ryser, a reporter and member of !Mediengruppe Bitnik, traces the road trip of both packages and recounts their stories at such a breathless pace that it is as if we were following their journey live.

Daniel Ryser's account has also been published in the book *Delivery for Mr. Assange/Ein Paket für Herrn Assange* by Echtzeit Verlag, Basel, and will be launched at the !Mediengruppe Bitnik talk, 8 March 2014.

Small gallery to the left:

Delivery for Mr. Rajab, 2014 (in cooperation with Julian Assange)

The “post drone” transmitted 29,199 pictures from its second journey to Bahrain – and the second chapter of this contemporary tale of surveillance. 28,497 of those were black. You might call the video piece *Delivery for Mr. Rajab* a live version of Kasimir Malevich's famous black square of 1914, which was described as the “last painting”. In contrast, the work of !Mediengruppe Bitnik involves an endless succession of new black pictures (probably because the parcel had been stuffed in a light-proof bag).

!Mediengruppe Bitnik and their followers on the net were continually informed via GPS where these black pictures were coming from: A third screen of this re-creation of the project at the Helmhaus shows a map on which the “post drone's” journey can be traced. The print on the wall focuses on the hour-long moments during which the parcel was held up at an airport (in this case, the airport in Dubai) or in a distribution centre. The tangle of lines is caused by the fact that a GPS heading does not always position its source at exactly the same place. Although the parcel was stopped dead, it was producing GPS signals as if it was being handed around at the airport. In a tweet on the left side of the screen, WikiLeaks called the parcel a “hot potato” on which neither the Royal Mail nor customs were about to burn their fingers. The print visualizes this panic.

Square gallery:

Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2014

Delivery for Mr. Assange is also a “SYSTEM TEST”, as !Mediengruppe Bitnik call their attempt to ship a kind of one-eyed creature – the “post drone” – to Julian Assange. The system they are testing is one in which new paths of communication proliferate almost daily, only to be immediately abused for surveillance. “A mobile phone is a tracking device that also makes calls,” Assange writes in his book *Cypherpunks*. !Mediengruppe Bitnik's “post drone” on the other hand is a parcel that can also take pictures. It was sent on its way to find out if the snail mail route to Assange was still open. And indeed, it was: the parcel reached Assange after about 30 breathless hours, which thousands followed live online, including the BBC. When Assange finally received it, he held handwritten messages up in front of the camera – for instance, “Postal art is contagious” or “Free Nabeel Rajab”.

In this version, a selection of circa 10,000 pictures accumulated by the “post drone” are seen on two screens, each for fractions of a second. These are juxtaposed with some 17 metres of photo paper, on which every single one of the transmitted photographs has been printed, in a dramatic display of the sheer mass of photographs produced by the unmanned “post drone”. And in the Rajab project, there were more – 20,000 more – mostly black photographs. That is, of course, a flood of pictures, of the kind that daily washes over us when we scroll down websites, metre after metre. But the work poses another question as well: if one were to print all of the pictures that surveillance cameras have taken of you – yes, you – how many metres of photo paper would that fill?

Large gallery:

Delivery for Mr. Assange, 2014

After Assange received !Mediengruppe Bitnik's "post drone", he invited them to come to the Ecuadorian Embassy – the collective accepted and brought fondue along. This gave !Mediengruppe Bitnik the opportunity to see Assange's world-in-a-room – the room that has been the Australian's world for one and a half years – for themselves, though subject to extreme security measures and a ban on taking pictures in the Embassy. In order to exhibit the parcel at the Helmhaus – on loan from Julian Assange – !Mediengruppe Bitnik realized there was only one possible pedestal for this work: its context, in other words an exact replica of Assange's study, constructed from memory.

The ladies room in the Embassy has been converted into a rudimentary bedroom for Assange and the study replicated here has become the centre of his life. If he were to step outside of the Embassy, he would be arrested by the British police posted around the entire building and probably extradited to Sweden on charges of "sexual harassment" or to the United States, where he has been charged with treason which could mean the death penalty. Thus while his physical scope of action has been severely curtailed, his study has become the control centre of WikiLeaks, and a world-renowned symbol of the influence of total surveillance on our lives – and on our bodies.

For the exhibition "Delivery for Mr. Assange", !Mediengruppe Bitnik have used various means and media to process the visual material registered by the "post drone" on its London journey and on the journey from London to Bahrain. Their evaluation of a reality under complete surveillance is quintessentially exemplified by an American senator's response to the NSA revelations: he wondered how surveillance can be an invasion of privacy if you don't even realize it.

Publications

The narrative structure of the two presentations is echoed in the publications. For the exhibition by !Mediengruppe Bitnik, Echtzeit Verlag in Basel has published Daniel Ryser's description of the "post drone's" journey in a fast-paced textual visualization in which the journey itself resonates. Christian Waldvogel has also committed his tale of the origin of planets and the first budding of life to a publication, questioning specialists on specific chapters of his universal narrative.

!Mediengruppe Bitnik's book will be launched in conjunction with "Art under Mass Surveillance", a kind of symposium on 8 March 2014. Christian Waldvogel's book will be launched at the 5 o'clock thesis with astrophysicist Ben Moore, 19 March 2014.

Daniel Morgenthaler, Curator

Events

Performance by Christian Waldvogel

Saturday, 1 March 2014

Extravehicular Activity

Christian Waldvogel prepares planets in a laboratory tour, launches them into orbit and steps into the primordial broth.

2 p.m.: Input by Judith Blom, PhD, microbiologist at the University of Zurich

3 p.m.: Performance by Christian Waldvogel

Workshop and Talks with !Mediengruppe Bitnik

Saturday, 8 March 2014

Art under Mass Surveillance

!Mediengruppe Bitnik will speak with invited artists about a critical approach to technology, the supposed freedom of the Internet and the potential of art after Edward Snowden.

12–6:30 p.m.: Workshop with Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev, authors of the “Critical Engineering Manifesto”

7:30 p.m.: Talks by !Mediengruppe Bitnik and Julian Oliver (in English)

Book launch: *Delivery for Mr. Assange/Ein Paket für Herrn Assange*, Echtzeit Verlag, Basel, in cooperation with :digital brainstorming, a series of events organized by Migros Cultural Percentage

5 o'clock Thesis

Curator Daniel Morgenthaler and guests talk about the show:

Wednesday, 26 February 2014, 5 p.m.

“Wer nichts zu verbergen hat, hat nichts zu befürchten”

with Felix Stalder, PhD, Prof. of Digital Culture and Theories of Networking at the ZHdK

Wednesday, 19 March 2014, 5 p.m.

“There’s a planet for each of us”

with Christian Waldvogel and Prof. Dr. Ben Moore, astrophysicist and cosmologist, University of Zurich (in English)

Book launch: *Christian Waldvogel – unknown*, Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess, Zurich

Music in the Exhibition

For this exhibition, Juliana Müller has organized two extremely technological performances in keeping with the work of the current exhibitors:

Friday, 28 February 2014, 8:30 p.m.

Superterz feat. Simon Berz and Koho Mori-Newton

The Zurich electronica formation produces a tight weave of techno sounds and pulsating beats.

Tuesday, 18 March 2014, 8:30 p.m.

Stephan Wittwer

The Zurich musician plays the computer and combines synthetic sounds with live transformations of his own older improvisations.

Guided Tours

A variety of tours are available with the artists, Daniel Morgenthaler and art historian Kristina Gersbach. On Thursday, 27 March 2014, Daniel Morgenthaler will speak with Bruno Baeriswyl, Commissioner of Data Protection from Canton Zurich in the exhibition. The “Helmaus”, a mouse that has been luring children into the Helmhaus since June 2012, was invented by the artist Yves Netzhammer and is now looked after by the artist Anna-Maria Bauer. Pictured on the invitation card, the Helmaus leads young visitors through the exhibition in the company of kindergarten teacher and photographer Andrea Huber.

The exhibition is supported by:

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