Exhibition Text English

Of Bodies in Digital Space
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With James Bantone, bleed, Giulia Essyad, Mona Filleul, Victoria Holdt, Milena Mihajlović, Noemi Pfister, Thalles Piaget and Noah Ismael Wyss.

The exhibition features young artists whose work engages with the body in digital life. Since the dawn of the internet era, the topic has continued to be a subject of discussion as well as of artistic exploration: Utopian visions of transcending the body and becoming cyborg confront the sober reality of swiping over smooth, cold surfaces for hours on end, causing aching joints and disrupted sleep. The dream of a free, democratic network has given way to the mechanisms of the attention economy and commercialization. Virtual spaces and online platforms offer diverse opportunities for self-representation, artistic practice, as well as networking and community-building. The past few years have seen the growth of emancipatory movements surrounding questions of body images and norms, particularly in regard to gender and race. At the same time, virtual spaces beyond these niches continue to be dominated by bodies that peddle normative and gender-stereotypical conceptions of beauty as erotic capital within platform capitalism.

How does the youngest generation of artists, which was born in the 1990s, the decade that saw the launch of the World Wide Web, and grew up with the internet, respond to these developments? How do they bring their everyday experience and critical reflection of media-saturated life to bear on an artistic tradition of representing bodies, which, after all, is one of the great topics in art history?

The new work **follow me, "ok"** by **bleed** (Wilf Speller, b. 1991, currently lives in Zurich, and Nilz Källgren, b. 1989, currently lives in Sweden and Mauritius; collaboration since 2020) takes over the entirety of the museum. The conspicuous tangles of cables remind us that the supposedly virtual world requires a massive physical, energy-consuming infrastructure. The cables lead to the kinds of LED lamps used for selfies and videos. Mounted on tripods built from a variety of found materials, the lamps populate the space like strange and fragile creatures. bleed also understand these sculptures as characters alike to the followers (the audience) of influencers, who in turn represent an internet economy whose currency is attention (which then is sold to advertisers). It is in the figure of the influencer that questions about self-staging and self-promotion, identity construction, and new forms of fame become most acute. Speller and Källgren also examine the topic of self-promotion and branding in the choice of the name "bleed", which is reminiscent of the names of fashion labels or bands. Fittingly, their second creation for the exhibition is a series of clothing items (merch) featuring their name, which can be purchased in the museum's gift shop.

Noemi Pfister (b. 1991, lives in Basel) uses drawings and paintings based on digital sketches to combine elements with diverse references to art history and internet culture. The visual motifs share a melancholy mood and allude to both utopian and dystopian futures. **Crashing Sky** (2023) shows two teenagers on a moped and a skateboard, followed by a dog, passing a volcano that has just erupted. Surrounded by fire and lava, they seem relatively unconcerned by the threat – whether they are fleeing the scene or on a walk remains unclear. In **Border Sunset** (2022) a group of human and non-human figures are gathered on an open field with two watchtowers in the background rising into the dramatic light of evening sky. Inspired by a photograph by the artist duo Douna Lim und Théo Pessos as well as Edward Hopper's "Railroad Sunset", the painting accrues additional layers of meaning. Both hopeful and sombre, the artwork speaks of the power of communal living and the existence of social and geographical borders.
Pfister's drawings combine figures from virtual communities with the representation of physical intimacy between characters from books, for example children's literature, who appear to share a close-knit bond although they are absorbed in different interactions.

Thalles Piaget (b. 1996, lives in Biel) is interested in photographic images and concomitant internet phenomena as well as the question how they shape our perception of the world. Piaget uses pre-digital, experimental techniques of analogue photography to re-create the novelty of digitally designed images. This process also allows him to playfully and critically question the medium of photography and its role in the production, distribution, and reflection of images. **wave #2** (2023) and **screenlight** (2020) examine the surface, materiality, light, and reflections of digital devices and highlight their haptic sensuousness and quality. Printed on aluminium, the photographs have the character of an object and play with the glossiness and dullness of the image surface.

Gleichzeitig zwei Zeiten (2023) shows a macro-image of a broken screen that is reflected by a number of mirrors, which make visible the materiality of the usually invisible working mechanism of the device. The colourful pixels and liquid crystals along the cracks of the screen themselves become an image of a seductive interplay of forms. The work allows Piaget to provide insights into a hidden digital universe and to redirect the audience's attention to the relationship between viewer and object.

James Bantone (b. 1992, lives in Paris) examines the codes of pop culture as well as the image worlds of social media in his objects, photographs, and videos. The photographic series **Entrepreneur of the Self** (2023) shows an array of mannequins as one might encounter them at a wig shop. They show traces of previous use as well as of the artist's manipulations. Bantone conceives of mannequins as an abstracted image of the human body that is given the function of a commodity. He stages them as a type of fictiona-lized self, the type prevalent on virtual platforms. The title of the series is a reference to the historian and political scientist Achille Mbembe, according to whom humans have become entrepreneurs of the self as part of the development of capitalism – self-entrepreneurs, so to speak, with a mouldable and exchange-able identity.

With **Child's Play 03** (2022), Bantone shows a doll whose childlike body and face are concealed in a crudely sewn wetsuit and thus elude our gaze. Sitting on an office chair, the figure is dressed in a shirt and tie. This gives it an absurd mixture of childlike and adult attributes; the body already seems to have been sucked into the logic of the (digital) working world. The title of the sculpture is borrowed from a horror movie staring a killing doll.

Giulia Essyad (b. 1992, lives in Geneva) works with photography and video as well as sculpture, per-formance, and text. The mass-production and consumption of images of bodies and the concomitant stereotypes are central topics of Essyad's work. Many of her photographic pieces, including those in the exhibition, are based on digitally altered self-portraits. The installation **Chapel** (2023) makes reference to church windows from different historical periods and to the history of bodily representation, particular-ly in Christian art, staging encounters between physicality and spirituality, history and present, sublime and kitsch, love and death. For **Menu** (2023), which is reminiscent of photographs of food-truck menus, Essyad relied on artificial intelligence for certain elements – an early creative application (the piece was de-veloped last year, shortly after the launch of the first freely available AI image generator). At the same time the images critically examine these new tools, which generate uncanny and unintentionally funny images, particularly of bodies, and harbour problematic future applications.

The inflatable sculpture **Monument** (2020) is reminiscent of a fictional historical statute from a Hollywood film – one could imagine it in an abandoned fun fair or a Hard Rock Café – and was inspired by Essyad's engagement with pop culture and fetishization.

Noah Ismael Wyss (b. 1999, lives in Bern) designs objects that deal with the relationship between physi-cal and digital space. We move through the digital world by touching, sometimes even stroking, interfaces. In **Donna and Harry** (2022) a computer is covered in skin: a human surface. Skin also serves as the point of departure for Wyss's works in Room 7. Virtual "skins" can be selected or bought in video games to customise and individualize one's avatar (a flourishing market that also includes brands like Louis Vuitton. These avatars can resemble one's actual body, but they also provide an opportunity for slipping into a completely different physicality. **Untitled (Menu>Shop>Skins)** (2024), which was newly conceived for the exhibition, as well as **Skin of a Transhumanist** (2022) translate this idea into physical space: a futuristic

object generates skins; containers provide a choice of different options. The work can be understood as a commentary on identity construction at the intersection of individuality and group belonging, both in the digital and physical world. Wyss also returns to the motif of skin in digital spaces in his examination of the relationship between humans and non-humans in **Digital Hunt** (2023): the draped skin belongs to a virtual raccoon. Wyss found that animals in video games rarely are more than objects for target practice. **Quest for Data** (2023) engages with the voluntary loss of privacy on social media through the medium of an open book of faces. The platforms know our preferences and categorize us according to identity profiles.

Victoria Holdt (b. 1992, lives in Basel) examines the connections between bodies, media, and materials in narrative video and audio installations. **Visceral Freeloaders** (2024) began with her fascination with scientific images and microscopic recordings that are partially coloured and thereby create their own aesthetic. The video sequence is based on the recordings of the individual segments of a tape worm, also known as "proglottids". These creatures have both male and female reproductive orangs and are capable of reproducing themselves. The installation asks the audience to reflect on the parasitic and symbiotic relationships between humans and other beings. The organically formed projection surface consisting of skin glue investigates the topic on the level of form; the sound appears to be coming from the inside of the bodies and amplifies the sense of a strange world infesting the host body.

The colourful and glossy appearance of the sculptural video works **Sugar Tits** (2023) is reminiscent of sweets, their shapes of female breasts. A peep hole allows the audience to discover the narrative videos embedded within. The title originally referred to a pacifier made from cloth and filled with sugar, but also is used as a derogative term for women. With the work the artist appropriates the term in an empowering fashion.

Milena Mihajlović (b. 1997, lives in Basel) creates installations based on digitally created videos, as is the case in the exhibited work ***Race Me Through*** (2023). The display and viewing of bodies might be the essence of online platforms like Instagram and TikTok. As rule, conventional beauty and gender norms are not only prevalent on these platforms, but also tend to be exaggerated; at the same time, however, fast-paced online culture also provides opportunities for niches, parodies, and re-interpretations to emerge. Enter Mihajlović's work, which examines these concepts in relation to bodybuilding and motorcycle cultures and juxtaposes the male-dominated worlds of fitness, bodybuilding, and motorcycles with queer figures such as *Musclemommy* and *Bikerfemme*. The nearly life-sized representation urgently raises the question how we compare our bodies with omnipresent digital idols and how we recognize both positive and problematic influences and can find playful responses. One possible reaction to the endless array of perfect bodies and status symbols online is melancholy, which is ironically commented on in TikTok cultures like SadBikeTok and SadGymTok.

Mona Filleul (b. 1993, lives in Lausanne and Brussels) contributes **Bonnie** (2024) and **Kuromi** (2024), which is constructed from sheets of plasterboard into which reliefs and objects made from LED lights have been integrated. The reliefs are the result of labour-intensive manual crafting: Filleul first creates clay models, then covers them in mulberry fibre, and finally applies the actual surface, a layer of beeswax and colour. The outside relief alludes to the world of memes, while the inside is an intimate portrait of a friend. Aside from the true-to-life head – albeit with the face hidden – the person is represented through their preferred texting emojis. The simultaneous presence in physical and digital spaces and the presence of the body in the allegedly disembodied digital world are central topics in the work of the artist. In which of these spaces do people feel at home? When is there a need for the creation of new (virtual and physical) spaces by communities of like-minded people – just as the installation consisting of building material quite literally delineates a new space?

The motif of showing and hiding, which already occurs in the portrait, also comes up again in **Thank You and Me** (2024), which was created with Gaia Vincensini and can be found on the opposite wall.