

Seeing in the Ocean of Noise

A confrontation with these football-faced figures, in their colorful vitrines, incites some propelling puzzles. Their compositions are atypical; a wig on top of a weighted cement football, placed on a ceramic vase (actually a replica of a readymade vase) brings an expressive craft attribute to the gallery setting. These figures are meticulously housed in vitrines, like Ancient Greek busts in a museum, and they appear in different shades when viewed through the multi-colored panels of each cubicle wall. As we enter Heidi Voet's new solo exhibition '06myflipside,' these arresting colors encourage the audience's movement around the space, in which layers of vibrantly patterned banners, bearing manifold messages and digits, shine from the background to create a sonorous labyrinth.

At the first glance, we are exposed to a laborious world full of data and different plastic languages—material, patchwork, form, concept and so forth—while also stepping into an uncanny domain where scribbled texts pop up here and there. "Password for the hidden underwater golden cave." Pondering this sentence suddenly brings a new light to the exhibition and its title.

What if we took '06myflipside' to be the password? Would we be able to perceive another hidden world? What would become visible to our eyes in this underwater golden cave?

Codes start to turn into gestures and the cold, faceless statues begin to make perfect sense. It is a woven landscape depicting our data-driven contemporary reality, where logging in is the major motion barred by the passwords digitally stitched across the banners. Apart from the illegible streams of code, we also enter into some rather private spaces, suggested by personal notes like a shopping list and a calculation formula, or other more open sources such as statements from found T-shirts. The juxtaposition of this circulating data manifests a complex highway system, materializing the networked information connecting various dimensions of space (from mental to virtual) through which our means of perception is to be challenged. As Hito Steyerl argued in her essay addressing contemporary perception, "Seeing is superseded by calculating probabilities. Vision loses importance and is replaced by filtering, decrypting, and pattern recognition."⁽¹⁾ Among Voet's displays, an allegorical space is discreetly generated to reveal our sense of being in cohabitation with a penetrating information infrastructure and cybernetic algorithms. We are called to read the patterns of data together with these

limbless figures, who suddenly appear to be identity-free avatars ready to submerge themselves into a DeepDream (2).

How are we going to comprehend such a matrix world? What are the messages here? How do we extend our vision and read beyond a human mind? Is our sight and mind already augmented by AI? It feels like Voet's exhibition is posing a rather urgent concern: is it time for humans to be able to see and read like a machine?

Considering the artist's approach of appropriating a wide range of materials in response to these questions can perhaps help us explore and imagine further. Throughout Voet's practice, there is a relentless attention to creating a highly-crafted constellation of the present, which is sensitive to various cultural contexts, value systems and the circulation of products. This strategy of inquiry lends a critical view to the construction of self and society. Very often, the artist employs banal objects to signify certain practices or values to be extracted from everyday experiences. For instance, vases have been recurring objects. As a feminine negative space is held by the silhouette of this domestic object, Voet's early vase series were sculpted with unconventional materials such as cinder block. With a playful twist, the artist exposes gendered and/or transgendered social processes, while further suggesting the transformations of lifeform and materiality (ancient skeletal fragments of marine organisms form limestone, which itself forms concrete). Weaving, an intensive labor often associated with feminine work, is one of the signature treatments in Voet's oeuvre, employing materials such as plastic bags, watches and wigs. As an exhibition, '06myflipside' shines with a new linguistic turn, with Voet confidently manipulating an abundance of materials and treatments. The relation of form, materiality and objecthood with a diverse and intensive investment of labor, draws a sharp aesthetic difference from the artist's former singular and minimal approach. A more porous deliberation on the work is permitted by the delicate visual balance and sense of freedom shared within the display.

With this in mind let us return to the underwater golden cave. The nonhierarchical distribution and collage of data—consisting of digitally stitched passwords, hand sewn private messages, mass-produced prints, professional reproduction of patterns and shapes and so on—actually composes what we in the information society call "the ocean of noise," loudly waiting for our recognition. As we are busy processing, can we even consider passwords, though usually composed of a series of illegible letters, as a new form of literature? These coded words that are arranged to indicate passages, guarding space between the public and the private and providing a sense of terrains and levels of

security, are rapidly created everyday around the globe by both humans and algorithms. They immediately create a sense of speed, opening one space after another. They change faces in a jump. How can we then further identify signals and hear music from this ocean? Steyerl suggests a good old method called apophenia, "the perception of patterns within random data." She also reminds us that "today, the question of separating signal and noise has a fundamental political dimension. Pattern recognition resonates with the wider question of political recognition. Who is recognized on a political level and as what? As a subject? A person? A legitimate category of the population?"(3)

Stretching from this understanding, we may find ourselves on the desolate shore of data, feeling a sheer sensibility to grow an adaptable perception. With seamless composition, Voet's work again reminds us of our exchangeable identity and what social beings we are, even as we now log in to different operations and systems as eyeless avatars. At the same time we are given the opportunity to see how we can decode machine-like and recognize how our politics are formed in every act of seeing, as well as in the serendipitous encounters of contemporary life. The exhibition also generously concedes that we may log out of it, with all sorts of other possibilities.

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(1) Steyerl, Hito. "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition," *Duty Free Art*. London: Verso, 2017.

(2) "DeepDream is a computer vision program created by Google engineer Alexander Mordvintsev which uses a convolutional neural network to find and enhance patterns in images via algorithmic pareidolia, thus creating a dream-like hallucinogenic appearance in the deliberately over-processed images."
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DeepDream>. Accessed 7 May 2020.

(3) See note (1).