

Tanya Leighton

STUDIO Magazine



Becoming Another, 2021
Commissioned by Audemars Piguet Contemporary. Courtesy of the artist and Audemars Piguet

STUDIO Magazine, January 2023

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

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Aleksandra Domanović is an artist based in Berlin. Starting with an early interest in the internet, she has been exploring the relations of technology, history and identity in sculptures, videos and digital art-works throughout her career. For STUDIO MAGAZINE she talked with *Nina Franz* about the themes that inspired her most recent works, including a new series of images on ultrasound, the reciprocal relationship between seeing and being seen, gender-reveal parties, and her ongoing interest in what could be called *post-technological perception*.

Persistence of Vision

Kurfürstenstraße 156, 10785 Berlin
+49 (0)30 21 972 220, info@tanyaleighton.com, www.tanyaleighton.com

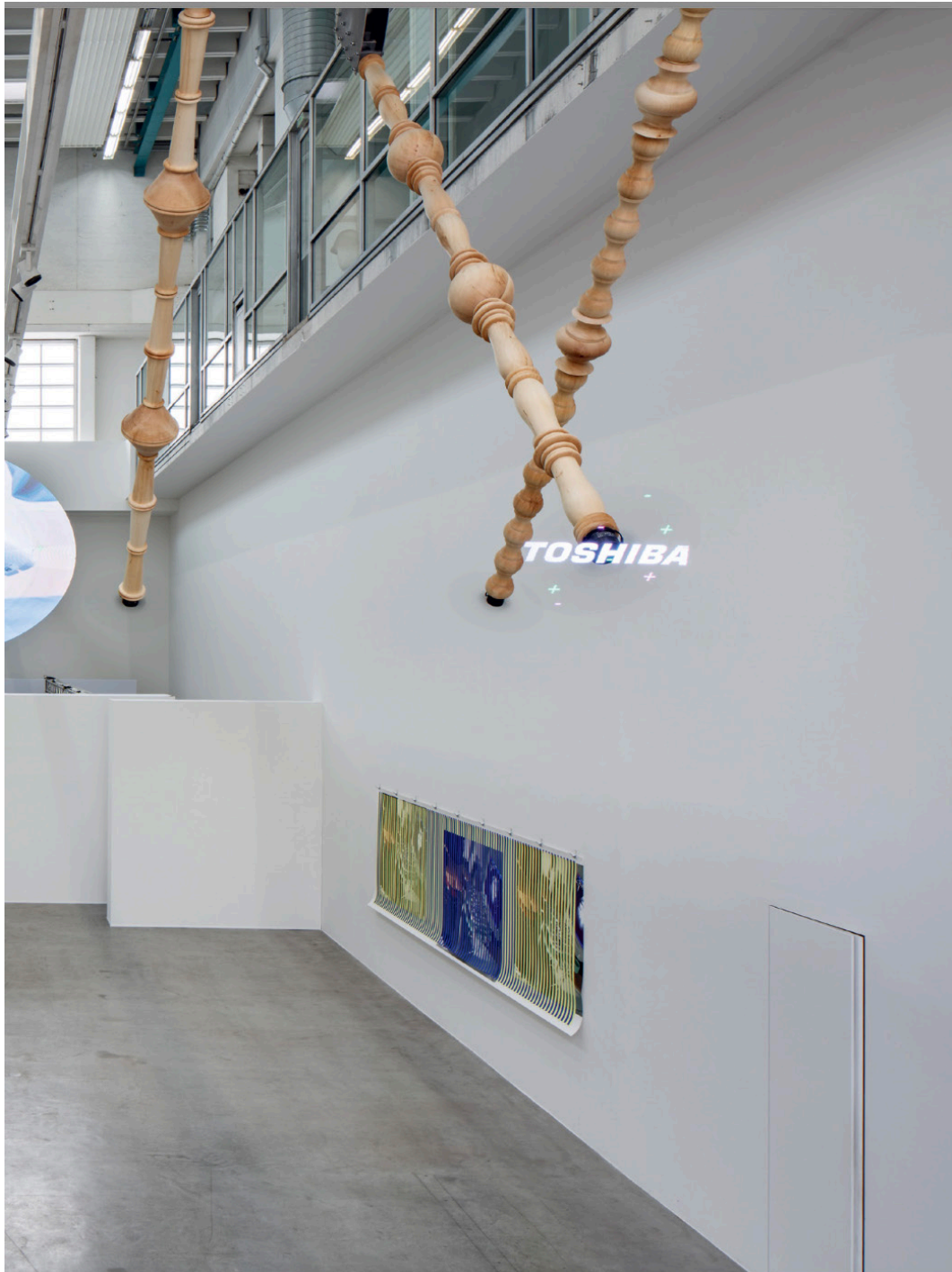
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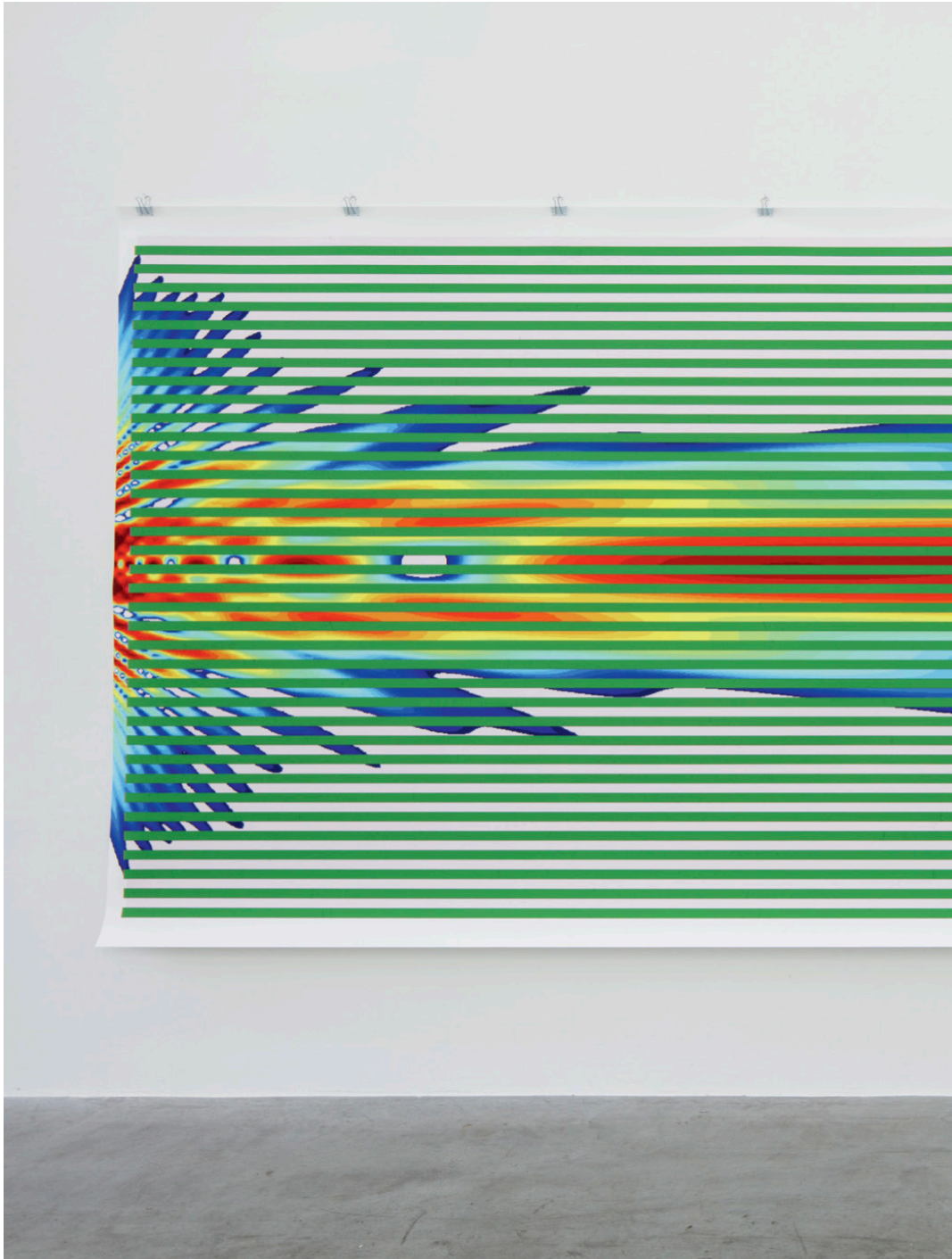
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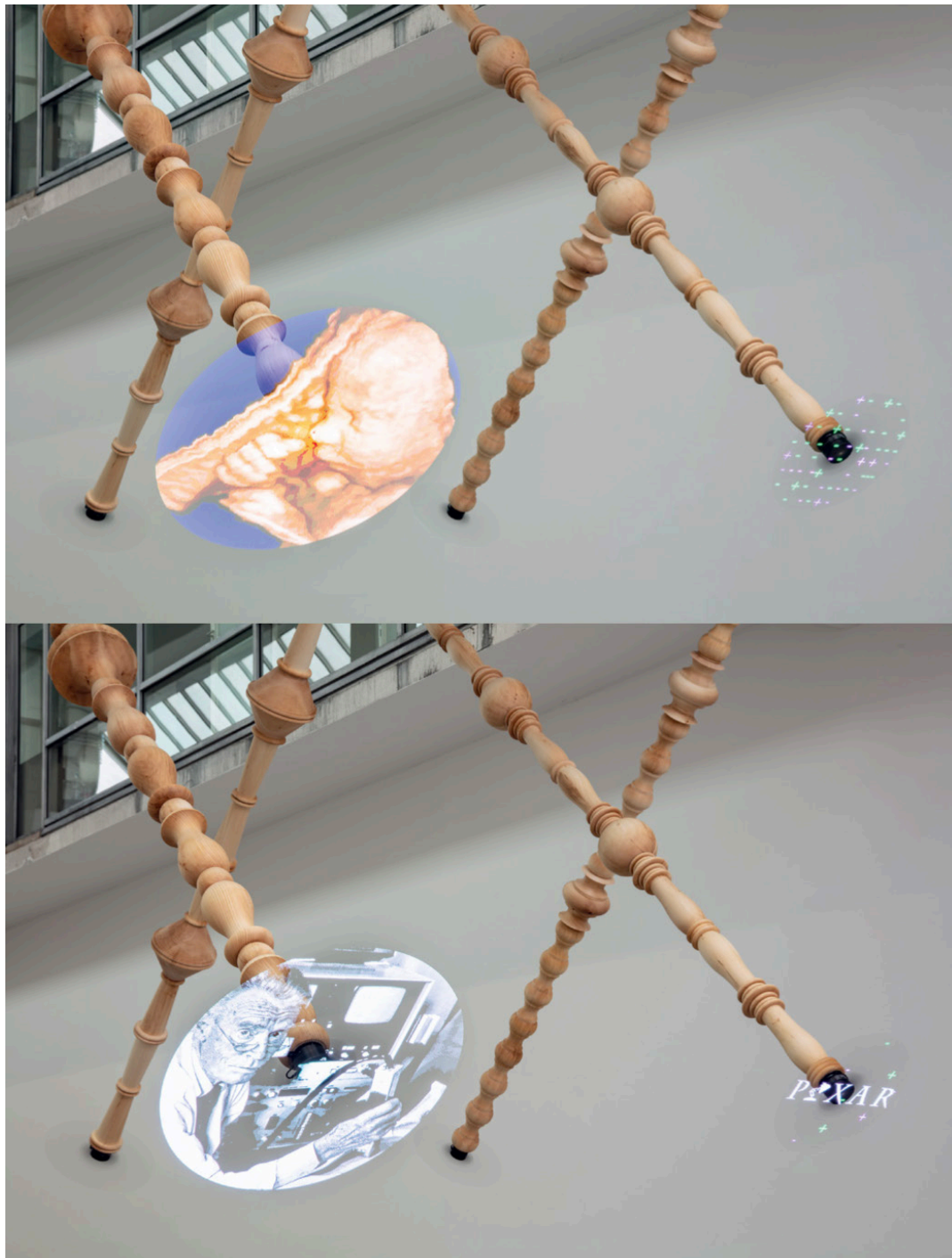
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Artist Aleksandra Domanović in conversation with Nina Franz

NINA FRANZ

Aleksandra, since the beginning of the global pandemic, you have developed a new perspective in your work, focusing on different aspects of perception. Can you tell us a bit more about this new body of work?

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ

For a series of silkscreen prints that I made for Klosterfelde Editions in 2020, I employed a visual effect that has been a recurring feature in my work since: The so-called Bezold-effect, which uses small areas of tightly interspersed colour, is an optical illusion that makes a colour appear different depending on its adjacent colours. In the time coming up to the exhibition I had watched the movie *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* by French director Céline Sciamma, a somewhat slow but beautiful story of two women – Marianne and Héloïse, a painter and a troubled aristocrat – set in the 18th century on an isolated French island. Héloïse can't know that Marianne is commissioned to paint her portrait, so Marianne has to observe her discreetly and paint from memory. Eventually Héloïse finds out and starts posing, thus returning the gaze, which leads to them becoming lovers. What unfolds is a story very much about looking, they create each other as lovers through intense observation. Just like this story, my prints are about looking. Here, and in the works that I've been making since, I have been exploring what one could call the "co-constitutive power of the gaze."

Then in 2021 I started experimenting with another optical illusion called persistence of vision, which is the ability of the eye and brain to retain a visual impression for some time after the visual stimuli have been removed. A commonly given example of this phenomenon is the apparent fiery trail of a glowing coal or burning stick while it is whirled around in the dark. This is the same principle that the so-called holographic LED fans from my *Worldometer*-series deploy to captivate our senses with the illusion of an image floating in space, apparently unbound to any medium. I have seen other artists use these fans before, always as screens, but I wanted to use them sculpturally. I figured if the spinning motion creates the flat image, it can also create a volume. So I worked with the ancient technique of wood turning and placed the LED fans atop hand-turned wooden pillars on the same axis, making the entire sculpture materialise through the spinning motion.

NINA FRANZ

Most recently, first for the exhibition *Becoming Another* with Audremars Piguet Contemporary in 2021 and again for the image spreads that are printed in this issue of *Studio Magazine*, you've turned your eye to ultrasound sonography, an imaging technique that uses sound waves to produce images of structures within the body. What inspired you to look at this technology?

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ

I was researching the history of medical imaging techniques, which is one of my ongoing interests. From late 19th century ink drawings of brain cells to hi-res 3-D MRI images of entire organs, scientists have made captivating and beautiful images of the human body that are on par with whatever was going on in art at the time. The creative industry has also influenced medical imaging. I was fascinated to find out that the first 3-D ultrasound machines used an algorithm created by Pixar to make 3-D images out of the multitude of 2-D scans that ultrasound records. Another thing connecting me to this technology is my mom, who is a radiologist specialised in diagnostic ultrasound. When her practice shifted from working at the hospital to a private practice, we literally had ultrasound machines standing in the house for some time. So, ultrasound is something that I have been around since childhood.

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Worldometers, 2021
Installation view, Tanya Leighton Gallery, Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery

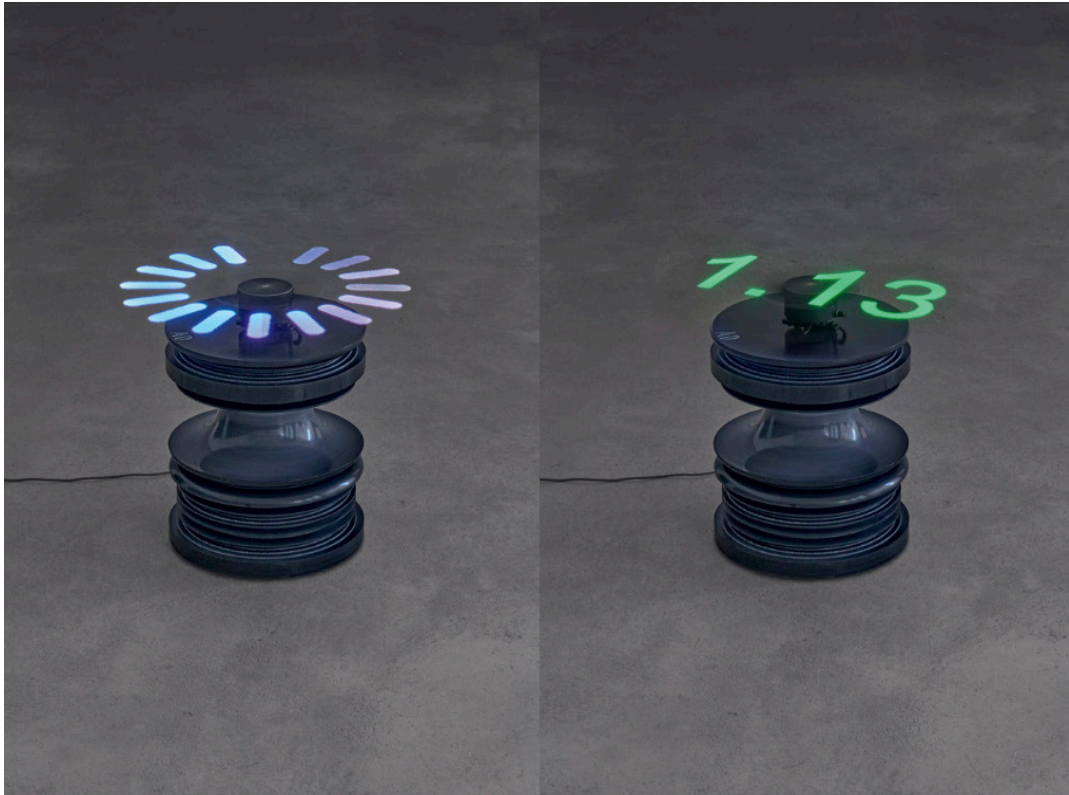
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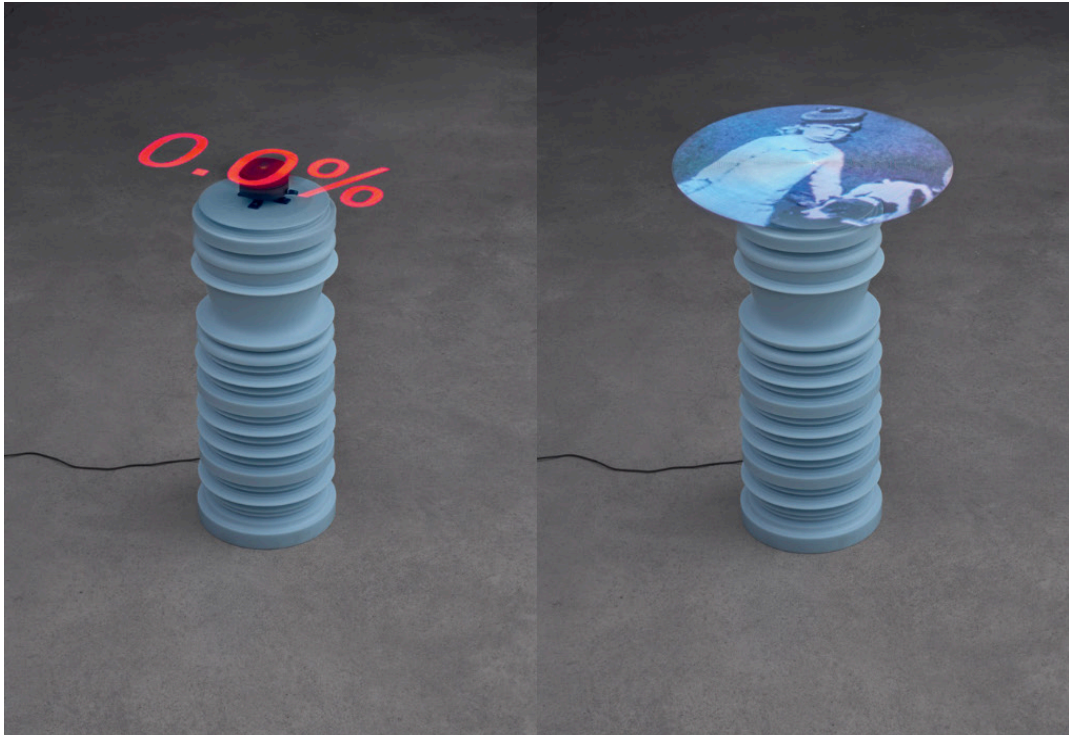
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Worldometer 2, 2021
Solid surface material, LED fan projector, 1 minute video loop
42.7 x 52 x 52 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery

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Worldometer 3, 2021
Solid surface material, LED fan projector, 1 minute video loop
80.5 x 52 x 52 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery

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Worldometer 21, 2021
Lime wood, LED fan, Raspberry Pi mini computer. Self generating 1min video loop, 74 x 52 x 52 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Richard Saltoun Gallery

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Years later, I encountered the book by feminist theorist Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. In chapter five they talk about the dual functionality of the ultrasound transducer, which is at the same time a transmitter and receiver of ultrasound waves that interact with the body's various densities. This dichotomy makes this technology a particularly poignant apparatus of observation and made me look at ultrasound from a whole new angle.

NINA FRANZ

In this chapter, titled "Getting Real: Technoscientific Practices and the Materialization of Reality", Barad talks about measurements and objects "intra-acting": How something appears seems to depend on how we measure it or look at it. Not only that, but in perception, the object and the technique of observation are inseparable, or in Barad's words "entangled" with one another.

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ

Exactly! Looking is not a one-way stream. To see is to change, as Carson Chan wrote in his text about *Becoming Another*. For example, in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* an internal transformation happens when a desirous look is perceived. One could say that for Barad, the object (Héloïse) and the "instrument" of observation (Marianne) are one, inextricably intertwined. So, I thought, something similar happens in the prints where I use the Bezold effect and with the spinning LED fan works as well. The colour or whatever is going on in the picture cannot be detached from the viewer. It is created by the act of looking. And by Barad's logic, the picture and the viewer are created reciprocally. I wanted the viewers to feel this with their own bodies. In *Becoming Another I* showed two large inkjet prints utilising the Bezold effect and a group of six *Worldometer* sculptures, with the wood-turned columns that have rotating LED fan-displays attached to them. In the chapter from *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad focuses on ultrasound imaging and talks about the sociological, material and discursive changes that take place in the technological "seeing" of the unborn foetus.

NINA FRANZ

Ultrasound technology also played an interesting role in the recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. This is a technology that is highly contested in the anti-abortion debates, especially in the USA but also here in Europe, because it seems to give an objective account of the legal status of human life inside a woman's body. In this way, it takes agency away from the woman and hands it over to the imaging machine and the medical experts who use it. For example, a law that went into effect in Texas in 2020 stated that an abortion is illegal after the point in a pregnancy when a "foetal heartbeat" can be detected. This detection happens on the screen of an ultrasound machine as early as six weeks into a pregnancy, when most women don't even know that they are pregnant. But it is entirely unclear what a "foetal heartbeat" actually is and what it is that the ultrasound makes visible. Critics have pointed out that the pulse that is visualized on the screen of the ultrasound machine at six weeks of gestation is nothing but electric cell activity that will form an actually functional heart only much later in the pregnancy. So, the "foetal heartbeat" and with it the whole legal appraisal of a pregnant woman's control over her own body is arguably reduced to the somewhat arbitrary effect of a machine.

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIĆ

That is indeed very interesting, and exactly what I think Barad is talking about. A lot of other questions pop up from such a reading of ultrasound imaging. For example, what is at stake in knowing the gender of a child before they can determine it themselves? Or how is the world pre-configured for that child in a way that might run counter to its own inclinations? On the LED fan-displays within *Becoming Another I* show images detailing the historical development of ultrasound technology, the logos of ultrasound manufacturers and guidelines for reading obstetric ultrasounds alongside images from gender-reveal smoke explosions and party incidents. This includes the so-called El Dorado Fire, a wildfire in Southern California's Yucaipa area that burned more than 9000 hectares, destroyed several buildings and claimed a casualty during the 2020 wildfire season. The fire was set off by a pigment powder explosion at a gender-reveal party. *Becoming Another* is ultimately about things becoming something else, foetus becoming the ultrasound image, a gender reveal party becoming an environmental catastrophe, sound waves becoming images, strangers becoming lovers...

NINA FRANZ

To me, the recurring theme of perception seems indicative of a larger situation, in which many people in the Global North experienced such a severe disruption and sense of urgency as the global pandemic for the first time. For many, this meant a total shift in their perspectives on the world that surrounds them, starting from the very personal to wider societal realities. One could say that with the cascading crises that have been intensifying since 2020, from the pandemic, the unfolding climate catastrophe, the shifts to the radical right in many countries of the world and the return of ultra-conservative policies, to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent economic crisis, context has come to crush a lot of the pre-sets of how people perceive what is going on around them. I assume that you, as someone who has experienced the breakdown of Yugoslavia and the proximity of war in Europe in your own childhood, must have a specific perspective on these events.

Are these works of yours also an attempt at recalibration of perception?

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ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIC

Having experienced the dissolution of Yugoslavia is definitely a useful tool for me in terms of making sense of the world right now. Maybe the war in Ukraine was less of a shock to me because of it. On the other hand, the beginning of the pandemic was very disorienting, I had no blueprint for that yet; no way of gauging the situation.

NINA FRANZ

Your *Worldometer* series taps into this issue by showing real-time data about the pandemic. Can you explain how this works?

ALEKSANDRA DOMANOVIC

My *Worldometer* sculptures are named after worldometers.info, a website that aggregates live tickers for various real-time statistics, including coronavirus data. In the early days of the pandemic, I got obsessed with it, compulsively checking various countries' COVID-19 statistics and comparing them. At the same time, I was playing with these new screens, the so-called holographic LED-fans. They are intended for use in advertising and come with various pre-installed demo videos. I decided to keep the videos as they were in a readymade fashion and infused them with daily COVID-19 data sourced from worldometers.info. What one sees in the end are the demo videos, everything from a freshly washed bell pepper flung through the air to a deconstructed hamburger, a jewellery display or a headphones advert, all spinning or floating, with Corona-statistics ticking away on top of all that. I guess that's how reality felt at the time, I saw numbers everywhere and they were spinning out of control.

On the technical side, I installed a Raspberry Pi computer into the sculptures, this small computer gathers data online and updates the fans in real-time. The works come in groups of three, with individual sculptures displaying the daily or weekly new number of deaths, cases and recoveries from COVID-19. Right now, I have one such group at the Taipei Biennial, showing current data for Taiwan. Next year a similar work is going to be exhibited at GAMeC in Bergamo Italy, displaying the data for that country, and so on.

The question is what happens to the work when the coronavirus statistics stop being updated every day, or the virus goes away completely. Should the work become a sort of a time capsule for the previously collected data, or something else? These are the things I am thinking about. As their name suggests, *Worldometers*, can be read as kinds of measuring devices, but what they will measure in the future is not quite clear yet. the data for that country and so on.

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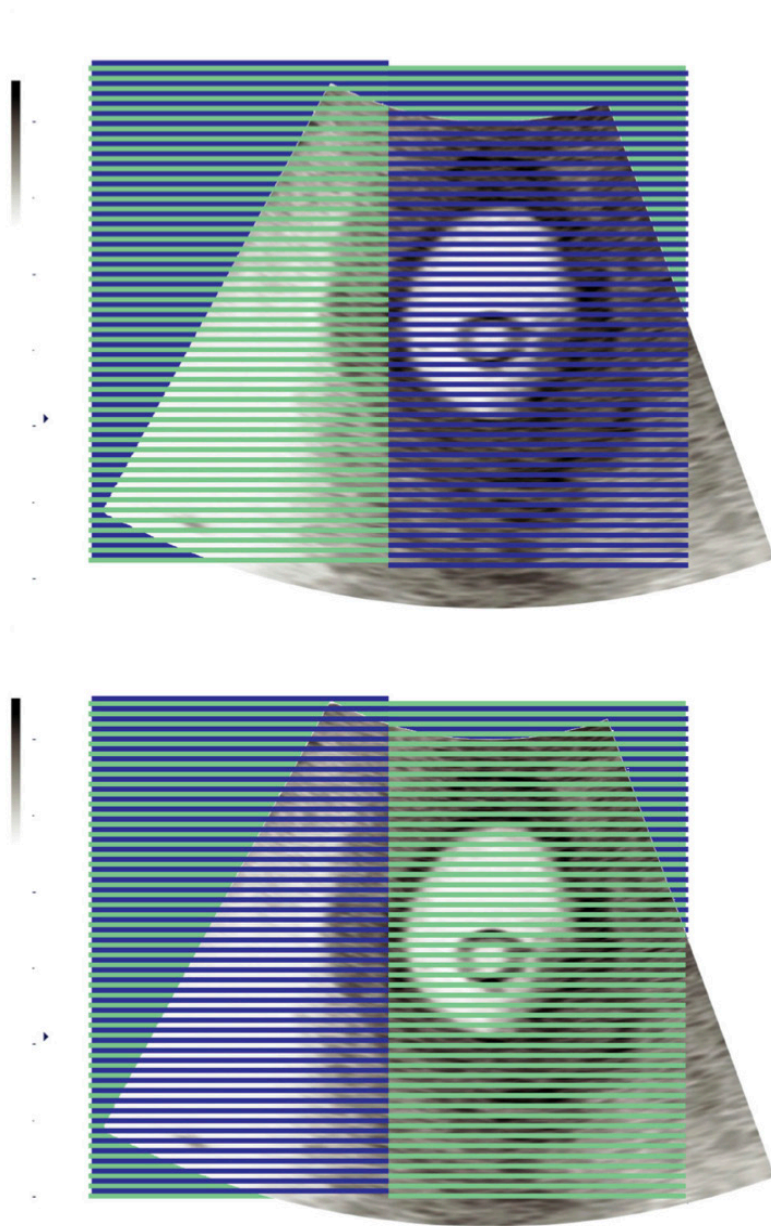
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From top to bottom: Portrait of a Lady on Fire 17 and Portrait of a Lady on Fire 24, 2020
Silkscreen print on paper, 60 x 80 cm

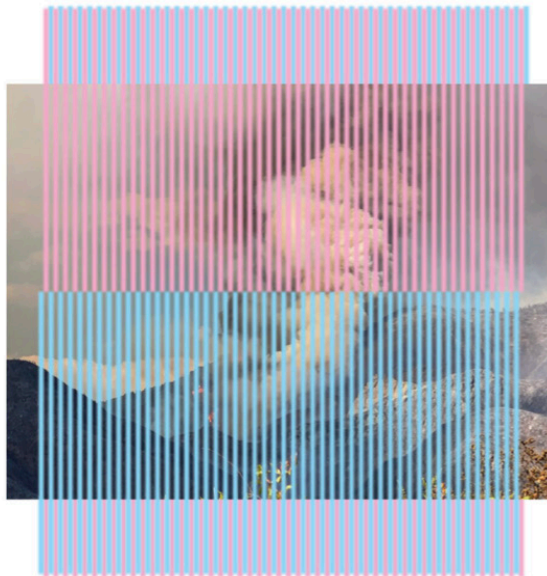
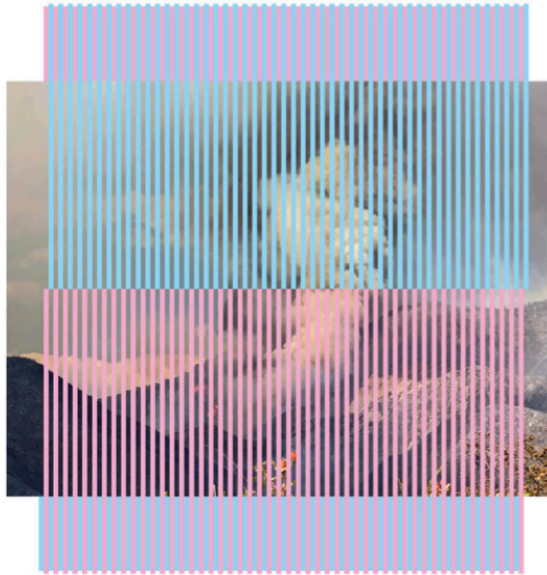
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*An ultrasound image of a human embryo with cardiac activity located
in close proximity to the yolk sac at approximately 6 weeks of gestation, 2022
Copyright: Dr. med. Miroslava Domanović*

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View of the El Dorado Fire from El Dorado Ranch Park on Saturday, September 5, 2020, 2022
The El Dorado Fire, also colloquially known as the Gender Reveal Fire, was a wildfire that burned near the community of Yucaipa and the San Geronio Wilderness Area of the San Bernardino National Forest in San Bernardino County, California in the United States, during the 2020 California wildfire season. The fire was caused by a pyrotechnic device at a gender reveal party and spread rapidly, causing one firefighter fatality. Copyright: San Bernardino National Forest, Zach Behrens
Courtesy of the artist