22/02—19/05/2019

solo exhibition

Janek Simon

Synthetic Folklore

Curator

Joanna Warsza

In 2015, Janek Simon fabricated at home a 3-D printed retrospective of his work with several abstract patterns, which organized his various interests and passions: from globalization, political geography, and artificial intelligence, through financial speculations, DIY strategies, postcolonial theories, to the most recent one: synthetic folklore. Like that picture, this exhibition maps and decodes the last fifteen years of the artist's work. It features a collection of paintings recovered from a ship graveyard in India, a visualization of the Polish national budget, new works on psychedelia and AI, a little house from childhood built with the wrong measurements, as well as documentation of the artist's curatorial and community work.
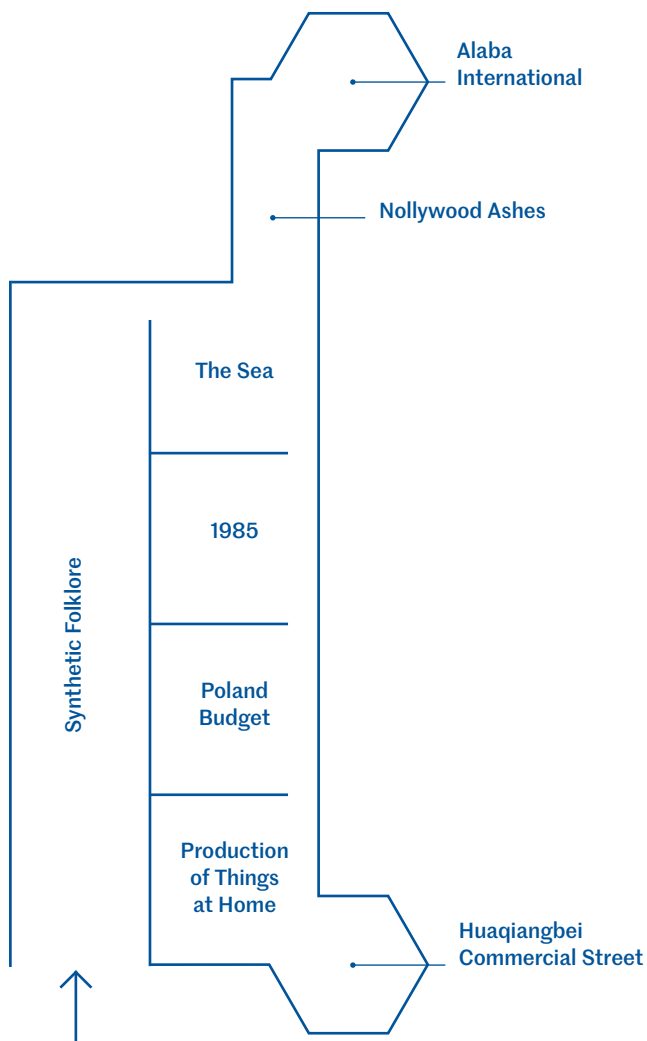
The retrospective opens with the eponymous world of synthetic folklore, with sculptures and mosaics from ethnic forms, their abstract patterns generated by algorithms combining motifs from India, Africa, South America, Europe, and Poland. Tradition and

culture are not homogeneous, but rather pro-
duced collectively through complex proces-
ses of exchange and appropriation. *Synthetic
Folklore* raises questions about whether and
how artificial intelligence can protect us from
the pitfalls of homogenization, xenophobia,
and essentialism. And what a new univer-
salism in the era of identity politics would
look like. Cultural geography is another of
Simon's recurring themes. What does it
really mean that something is far or near?
Flying from Warsaw to New Delhi takes ten
hours, as long as a trip to a remote village
in the Bieszczady Mountains. Space is defi-
ned not only by transport technologies and
cartography, but also by economic interests,
politics, and anthropogeography. The artist
tests his own methods of spatial research,
based on minutes, narratives, privilege, or
spatiotemporal compression rather than
kilometers or miles.

The exhibition is a multilayered one and can be
viewed, read, and experienced on a number

of levels: as a voyage, an essay, an algorithm, or an abstract picture. It leads along Janek Simon's paths, presenting, so comprehensively for the first time, his fascinating work and life, driven, as they are, by curiosity, erudition, and love of adventure, and supported from time to time by institutions such as the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art, for which it has been staged.

Exhibition Map

Alaba International

Nollywood Ashes

The Sea

1985

Poland Budget

Production of Things at Home

Synthetic Folklore

Huaqiangbei Commercial Street

Synthetic Folklore

#artificial intelligence #childhood
#postmodernism #Otherness #8-bit
#time–space compression #traveling
#reduction #postcolonialism #fun
#world-system #globalization
#cultural geography #DIY #post-irony
#new universalism #synthetic folklore
#late capitalism #digital materialism
#complexity #identity politics

Algorithms are already better than humans at playing chess, recognizing emotions, or sexual orientation.
So perhaps they could bring forth a universal value system?

Carpet Invaders
2002, video game

Janek Simon's debut is a video game whose graphics were borrowed from the ornamentation of a nineteenth-century Caucasian prayer rug from the collection of his grandfather. An image of the carpet was merged with the almost identical iconography of an early electronic classic, *Space Invaders*. The work remains key to understanding the artist's language and has been acquiring new meanings over time: from a clash of cultural images and symbols, through a commentary on the September 11 attacks and drone flight trajectories, to theories of new digital materialism.

Synthetic Folklore
2019, mosaics

Can an algorithm suggest a more surprising cultural hybrid than human creativity? Simon fed geometric textiles motifs from all over the world into a computer and "trained" the neural network on this database. The algorithm "learned" to produce new patterns and ornaments, no longer crafted by man but by an artificial intelligence. Is such new hybrid universalism possible, and if so, could machines help us invent it?

Alang Transfer
2012, installation

This work is a collection of paintings, drawings, and information charts from a ship graveyard in Alang, India, including over a hundred pictures from vessels from over thirty countries. Each of the works has sailed around the world, each calling at different ports, each measuring and perceiving the world differently, some under the flags of dictatorships, others representing the interests of the capitalist Global North, others as ordinary work-safety manuals. If all those routes are superimposed on each other, the result is a map of the globe free of any privileged points, unlike a cartographic model where the measuring process always has a beginning (e.g., the prime meridian).

Polyethnic
2016, twelve sculptures

A series of sculptures printed at home using a 3-D printer and representing figures that merge ethnic motifs from India, Africa, South America, Europe, and Poland. The prefix *poly-*, from Greek *polus*, means "much," "many","multiple"; *ethnic* denotes affiliation with a particular culture, community, or nation. The sculptures deconstruct seemingly homogenous identity concepts, which in reality emerge through complex symbolic and cultural processes, constantly (re)constructed and (re)negotiated.

The Sea

#identity politics #postcolonialism #cultural geography #world-system #traveling #friendship #adventure #Otherness #post-irony #globalization #cultural economy #imperialism #DIY

I take a piece of Poland to a completely different, distant place, and watch to see what happens next.

Auropol
2012–2019, video

Shot in the south of India, the films are about a group of Polish artists invited by Simon to stage an exhibition in the utopian city of Auroville – an experimental commune founded in 1968 by an international organization devoted to spiritual growth and self-realization. Auroville has re-invented its public institutions, its architecture blends European modernism with Eastern spirituality, its economy functions almost without money, and its educational system is based on affirmation. During one of the discussions on the role of culture, the idea to stage a Samuel Beckett play and organize a *butoh* dance show proved controversial. Is there room for traumatic art in a place meant to be utopian? Simon extended his invitation to six Polish artists who deal with painful personal or national issues, confronting them with those who seem free from such emotions. Is it possible to export trauma? And what would it mean in a place like Auroville?

Recently in Bangladesh
2005, print

A screenshot of all news published about Bangladesh by a leading Polish information portal in 2005, containing nothing but reports about explosions, a sunk ship, a road accident, and tornado casualties. Obvious evidence of how the media shape the perception of the Global South.

The Sea
2010, installation

A display of magazines and archival items evoking the history of the Maritime and Colonial League, a nationwide organization founded to promote Polish colonialism, highly active during the interwar period and counting about one million members by 1939. Two periodicals, published by the League in hundreds of copies, allow us to realize how Poland sought to join the European colonial race, e.g., in Brazil, Togo, and Liberia. The organization exists to this day as the Maritime and River League, while hegemonic fantasies are revived in ideas such as Intermarium, a proposed geopolitical federation of the countries between the Baltic and Black Seas, with Poland as the regional leader. Would it be possible that never-realized colonial imaginations are behind the current national-conservative shift?

The Adventures of Mr. Seven
2013, video

A film recording the incredible stories of an Auroville resident, including, among other things, his affair with the British Queen, the assassination of Olof Palme, or a recording studio meeting with the Beatles. The fantastic narrative mixes global pop culture themes, key events from world history, and Hindu mythology motifs. Presenting a great amalgam of meanings, the work asks what life would be most uncanny.

Polish Cultural Season in Madagascar
2006, installation

Speculating on the role of cultural diplomacy in the contemporary world and never-realized Polish colonial plans in Madagascar, Simon organized an unofficial Polish cultural season in the island's capital, Antananarivo. Housed in a store across the street from the Goethe Institute, it featured an exhibition of artists from Central Europe. In the eighteenth century, Madagascar was ruled for a couple of years by the adventurer and traveler Maurycy Beniowski. After 1918, the island became a subject of Polish colonial speculations and inglorious resettlement plans. Under the guise of a guerrilla-style promotion of Polish culture abroad, Simon combined a repressed memory of colonial ambitions with the contemporary political discourse.

Untitled (Stamp Album)
2010, stamp album

An album with postage stamps from Sub-Saharan countries commemorating various winter Olympic games.

Cynocephali
2014, five sculptures

Printed on a home 3-D printer, these sculptures were inspired by medieval illustrations for *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Among the creatures described by Polo were the Cynocephali, a race of dog-headed people who allegedly inhabited the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean. Polo was long considered the greatest traveler of all time, but the credibility of his accounts has increasingly been called into question, with some researchers claiming he never got further than Constantinople. The story of the dog-headed people bears witness to how the image of the Other as alien, exotic or different, are fabricated.

Sculptures from the Musée de l'Homme in Paris after Oskar Hansen's Drawings
2014, sculptures

A series of sculptures made after Oskar Hansen's sketches from his visits to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. In the 1950s, Polish avant-garde artists such as Hansen, Tadeusz Kantor, or Władysław Hasior were fascinated with what excited Paris back in the 1930s: a holistic vision of man, ideas of constructing oneself and the Other, and art's opening out to anthropology, ethnography, and philosophy. In order to start inventing a new world, one needs to realize first that things can look different at all.

Nollywood Ashes

traveling # postcolonialism
Otherness # cultural geography

What does it really mean that something is far or near?

Nollywood Ashes
2014–2019, posters, video

Since 2014 Simon has been
working on the production of
a Nollywood ⌒Nigerian film
industry⌒ remake of Andrzej
Wajda's *Ashes and Diamonds*.
What will happen to the story –
so heavily imbued with the Polish
context – when it is translated
into a completely different
cultural code? How universal is
the problem – so fundamental
for the Eastern European debates –
of our ambiguous perceptions
of communism? In the course of
the artist's several trips to Nigeria,
the script of an African version
of the film was developed; written
by the award-winning director
Niji Akanni, it transposes the
story of Maciek Chełmicki from
postwar Poland to war-torn Biafra.
In the late 1960s the province,
one of the three ethnically distinct
parts of Nigeria, announced it was
seceding, which led to a civil war
that claimed over 1.5 million lives
and to this day remains a repressed
part of Nigeria's history, banned
by official censorship. If the film
gets made it will be, in terms of
its social meaning, an analogy
of Wajda's picture, which broke
ground by being the first to present
the history of the post-WWII anti-
communist resistance to screen.

Alaba International

#cultural geography #traveling
#postcolonialism #Otherness

Sometimes I imagine the world as a network of things moving from one place to another. Often their journey begins in China and ends at landfills in Africa. Europe is somewhere in between.

Alaba International

Alaba International: A Selection of Objects from Alaba, Nigeria
2019, sculpture

Alaba International in Lagos is Africa's largest open-air market. The bulk of its trade, besides car parts and products imported from China, is in *tokunbo*, second-hand electronics from Europe. About thirty percent of the devices still work; those that don't are repaired or disassembled for parts. Printed circuit boards are recycled for gold and silver, the wires for copper. Such "urban mining" has become a significant source of raw materials in recent years, and it is estimated that there is more gold or silver in e-waste than in confirmed mineral deposits. All this, however, takes place without any control, in toxic conditions – average life expectancy for those working at the Agbogbloshie site in Ghana (West Africa's second-largest electronic waste-processing centre after Alaba) is less than thirty years. The recycled raw materials are then exported to China and India. Alaba is also the birthplace of Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry. In the early 1990s, large amounts of blank VHS videotapes were brought here from Taiwan, but no one wanted to buy them. Football matches and music videos from satellite TV started to be recorded on them, and eventually also local amateur films. The 1992 film *Living in Bondage* became a hit and kick-started the expansion of Nigerian cinematography.

Today, Nollywood is the second-largest film industry in the world (after Bollywood in India), churning out over two thousand titles a year. Exported to other West African countries, these productions have squeezed Hollywood movies out of the market.

1985

#identity politics #postmodernism
#post-irony #complexity #childhood
#late capitalism #cultural geography
#world-system #synthetic folklore
#DIY #artificial intelligence #fun

From smuggling goods to the data trafficking.

1985
2018, installation

1985 is a speculative project on the 1980s in Poland, positing that Communism ended with the era of street vendors, videotapes, satellite TV, and economic liberalization. Neoliberalism had seduced both sides of the conflict – the Party dignitaries as much as the opposition – and their economic goals converged long before the 1989 breakthrough. Displaying *PAN* erotic magazines, the era's technological achievements, and a selection of everyday gadgets, the artist tells the storyof how the Party elites and the pro-democratic opposition were beguiled by the same ideology: pop culture capitalism.

Synthetic Poles
2019, prints

Simon has developed an algorithmic neural network that has learned to render the faces of new, synthetic Poles based on the portraits of 10,000 actual Polish citizens. The work demonstrates how artificial intelligence learns to evaluate databases and how it processes and produces new images. If AI can render new Poles, what if it is used to distinguish Poles from non-Poles, healthy from sick, young from old? The piece is also a speculation on face profiling as public information, segregation, and supervision in the age of intelligent machines, and their legal, ethical, and social implications.

Untitled (*Air Fan*)
2007, sculpture

Once during a voyage to India, Simon threw his sneaker on an air fan. The shoe sometimes made regular circles, and sometimes nearly unpredictable ones. The two revolving objects comprised a double pendulum, which is an example of a chaotic system often found in nature.

Poland Budget

#complexity #economy #post-irony
#fun #robotics #DIY

I like graphs, diagrams, data visualizations – they look a bit like abstract art, but there is very specific meaning behind them.

Poland Budget for 2018
2019, installation

According to the Budget Act, the "government budget is an annual plan of revenues and expenditures as well as incomes and outlays of the organs of state authority, law enforcement, courts and tribunals, and government administration, adopted for a single calendar year. The budget is a legal-political act. It reflects the premises and objectives of the state's socioeconomic policy in the given period, and serves as the key means of their realization. It mirrors dominant political views on economic interventionism, the alleviation of income disparity, and the fulfillment of social needs. These are expressed in the structure of taxation and public spending, and above all in the level of budget redistribution." This is the work's second version after the original one from 2011; among the important new expenditures voted into law in the meantime is the 500+ benefit. The first Polish state budget was passed in 1768.

Exhibition Budget
2019, object from slats

A visualization of the *Synthetic Folklore* exhibition budget. Total budget: 190,000 zlotys.

PIT 2011
2012, object from plexiglass

A visual interpretation of the artist's personal income tax statement for 2011, designed using data visualization techniques and handmade by Simon with color plexiglass.

Cracow Bread
2005, mechanical objects

Janek Simon often wonders about the limits of homemade robotics. The bread loaves with insect legs, walking around obstacles, are one of the artist's earliest works. The loaves have crawled around many art galleries so far, such as the BOZAR in Brussels or the Zachęta in Warsaw; they are now returning to the Ujazdowski Castle Centre for Contemporary Art after more than ten years.

Production of Things at Home

#postmodernism #cultural geography
#globalization #late capitalism
#synthetic folklore #traveling #DIY
#childhood #post-irony #complexity
#artificial intelligence

The technological world we live in was invented in California in the 1980s. Only the vector has changed: the cybernetic utopia that was meant to liberate us has become a technoliberal dystopia.

Mondo 2000
2019, arrangement of magazines

Magazines coming out in California from the mid-1980s that described the interface of culture and technology were published by heirs of the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s. The authors of *Mondo 2000* speculated about the Internet, virtual reality, smart drugs, or the cyborgization of the human body. One could venture to say that what was a fantasy for the California subversives has now become reality. They viewed technology as a means of radical emancipation, as something that made the world better. But something went wrong.

Six-Day Week
2004, modified clock

The artist proposed introducing a new temporal structure where the week would consist of six days of twenty-eight hours each. During the opening of the "Wyspa" Art Institute in Gdańsk in 2004, Simon spent a week living according to this system in the exhibition space with a group of friends. Contrary to what it might seem, his proposition doesn't go against basic human biology. Research into circadian rhythms has shown that when people are isolated from external stimuli like daylight and timekeeping, they begin to function according to a twenty-eight-hour rhythm. A six-day week would constitute a separate social reality, based on its own laws and rules.

3-D Printer Printing Cheese
2013, electronic device

Built in 2015 by the British engineer Adrian Bowyer, the RepRap "Mendel" 3-D printer was revolutionary for at least two reasons. Firstly, it popularized the technology, which was until then expensive and used by professionals only. Secondly, the design allowed for self-replication: one printer could print out most of the parts needed to build another one. The purpose of the project was to make it capable of printing all the parts, thus eliminating the need for a centralized manufacturing plant. The project's radical assumptions haven't fully met expectations, and 3-D printing is still waiting for its significant industrial application. In the exhibition the printer is used to produce a model of a piece of cheese from the website www.thingiverse.com.

Drawing Machine
2019, electronic device

The artist has built a drawing machine that is controlled by an algorithm that evolves according to very non-specific and flexible rules. During the exhibition, the drawings will keep changing and the final effect ofthe software program's operation will remain unknown.

Splash Study
2014, electronic device

In 1895 the British physicist Arthur Mason Worthington published the book *The Splash of a Drop*. Using test equipment of his own making, he studied the shapes of the splashes of a drop of mercury falling on a surface. An apparatus placed in darkness emitted a flash of light when the droplet hit a plate, and Worthington then drew the image that was left on his retina. With the invention of photography, the researcher repeated the experiment using objective technology and found out that his drawings had little to do with reality. They were a fantasy, a projection of an imaginary perfect state. By reenacting the experiment within the space of art, Simon brings about a paradoxical situation where, observing the principles of conceptual order, he can still do anything.

Chinese Calculator / Little House
2006–2019, modified calculator, wooden construction

In 2000 Simon took the Trans-Siberian train to visit China. Having exchanged money at an open-air market in Manzhouli, near the Russian border, he realized he had been swindled with a rigged calculator that showed false results. Years later, Simon recreated the calculator and then used it to make engineering calculations for the construction of a model of a summerhouse he used to spend his vacations at as a kid.

Crooked Robots
2019, sculptures

The sculptures depicting the robots are inspired by illustrations to Stanisław Lem's *Fables for Robots* by Daniel Mróz.

Production of Things at Home

Huaqiangbei Commercial Street

#reduction #globalization #economy
#world-system #traveling

Sometimes I imagine the world as a network of things moving from one place to another.Often their journey begins in China and ends at landfills in Africa. Europe is somewhere in between.

Huaqiangbei Commercial Street:
A Selection of Objects from Shenzhen
2019, installation

Until the late 1970s, Shenzhen near Hong Kong was a small market town, a local hub for the surrounding areas of Guangdong province. In the early 1980s, the Communist Party of China leader Deng Xiaoping decided to reform the economy and combine revolutionary Maoism with capitalism. At the beginning the experiment was confined to exterritorial special economic zones; Shenzhen was the first of those, and it is estimated that in the 1980s its economy grew at an annual pace of forty percent. Today, the Pearl River Delta megalopolis, which the city is part of, comprises China's largest industrial manufacturing hub as well as a global electronics manufacturing center. The main factory of Foxconn, the Taiwanese group that manufactures electronic products for companies like Microsoft, Apple, or Nokia, is located here, as are the headquarters of Chinese corporations such as Huawei and Xiaomi. Huaqiangbei Commercial Street is the world's largest market for wholesale and retail electronics; all significant regional manufacturers have their outlets here, selling everything from single elements to ready-made components, phones, computers, drones, or humanoid robots. A separate five-story building sells cell phone cases only, and another one, ten stories high, is devoted exclusively to CCTV equipment. Huaqiangbei is also

a major innovation hub, home to countless factory labs, start-ups, and all kinds of project-funding agencies. The times when China merely manufactured (or copied) Western-designed products are long gone, and today many Chinese companies, such as the drone manufacturer DJI, are global leaders in their respective fields. China is also considered a leader in artificial intelligence and machine learning research.

Main Lobby

*A Bacteriological Analysis
of Holy Water*
2005

Education

⟨Smykowizje⟩
A workshop for families with
children up to age 5 ⟨in Polish⟩
Saturdays, 10 a.m. and 11 a.m.
Admission by ticket only
Pre-book at
info@u-jazdowski.pl
Participants meet in the foyer
23/02
09/03
23/03
06/04
27/04
11/05
18/05

⟨Smykowizje – Guided Tours
in Baby Carriers⟩
Guided tours for families
with children up to age 5
⟨in Polish⟩
Wednesdays, 1 p.m.
Admission fee included
in the ticket
Participants meet in the foyer
06/03
03/04
15/05

⟨How Does Art Taste?⟩
A workshop for families with
children aged 5–10 ⟨in Polish⟩
Saturdays, 12 noon
Admission by ticket only
Pre-book at
info@u-jazdowski.pl
Participants meet in the foyer
23/02
13/04
27/04

⟨Art Knows No Age⟩
A series of get-togethers
for adults ⟨in Polish⟩
Wednesdays, 12 noon
Admission free
Participants meet in the foyer
27/02
13/03
08/05

⟨Art Viewpoints⟩
Guided tours in Polish
Thursdays, 6 p.m.
Admission free
Participants meet in the foyer
28/02
07/03
28/03
11/04
16/05

⟨Let's Talk About Art⟩
Guided tours in English
Saturdays, 3 p.m.
Admission fee included
in the ticket
Participants meet in the foyer
02/03
16/03
06/04
27/04
18/05

⟨Teacher in the Centre⟩
Guided tours with teachers
⟨in Polish⟩
Selected Wednesdays, 4 p.m.
Admission free
Information at
edukacja@u-jazdowski.pl

⟨Creative School⟩
Workshops for organized
groups
Admission by ticket only
Information and pre-booking
at edukacja@u-jazdowski.pl

Accompanying Program

22/02/2019 (Friday)
  7 p.m. Opening
  9 p.m.
    DJ Set: Filip Lech
    and T. Kowalski
    VJ Set: Agnieszka Polska

23/02/2019 (Saturday)
  3 p.m. Guided tour with curator
    Joanna Warsza (in Polish)
  4:30 p.m. Mohammad Salemy
    *A Portrait of the Artist as
    a Living Algorithm*, lecture
    and conversation (in English)

28/02/2019 (Thursday)
  6 p.m. Guided tour with
    Janek Simon (in Polish)

07/03/2019 (Thursday)
  6 p.m. Guided tour with writer
    and journalist Max Cegielski
    (in Polish)

16/03/2019 (Saturday)
  3 p.m. Guided tour with
    benevolent dictator Aditya
    Mandayam, Brud (in English)

28/03/2019 (Thursday)
  6 p.m. Guided tour with
    publicist Edwin Bendyk
    (in Polish)

11/04/2019 (Thursday)
  6 p.m. Guided tour with
    philosopher and artificial
    intelligence specialist
    Aleksandra Przegalińska
    (in Polish)

27/04/2019 (Saturday)
  3 p.m. Guided tour with artist
    Nina Katchadourian and
    editor in chief of the *Cabinet
    Magazine*, Sina Najafi
    (in English)
  5 p.m. Janek Simon and
    Joanna Warsza, artist talk
    (in Polish/English)

16/05/2019 (Thursday)
  6 p.m. Guided tour with artist
    Marta Deskur (in Polish)

18/05/2019, Museums at Night
(Saturday)
  3 p.m. Guided tour with curator
    Joanna Warsza (in English)
  8 p.m. Guided tour with
    Janek Simon (in Polish)

A Portrait of the Artist as a Living Algorithm

We are surrounded by an ongoing discussion about algorithms and their contributions toward automation and the emergence of artificial intelligence. However, there aren't many in the field of art today who are seriously contemplating the real and tangible implications of the cybernetic revolution for their field. Even less is being done to direct the epistemic consequences of these acquired knowledges to construct new forms of self-reflection. Can the work of an artist be considered an algorithm or at least be compared to algorithmic processes? What kinds of methodologies are needed to erase the "authentic" and human-oriented self-image of contemporary art to expose its algorithmic logic? Can we even go further and re-ontologize the figure of the artist as a living algorithm? Since artistic practices take their final form in the public sphere, the invisibility of their most basic algorithms produces both an aura and doubt for the artist. These positive and negative false impressions, however, ought not to distract us from breaking down the being and function of the artist and analyzing its algorithmic core.

Mohammad Salemy

An independent Vancouver and Berlin-based artist, critic, and curator from Canada. He holds a BFA from Emily Carr University and an MA in critical curatorial studies from the University of British Columbia. He has shown his works in Ashkal Alwan's *Home Works 7* (Beirut, 2015), *Witte de With* (Rotterdam, 2015), and *Robot Love* (Eindhoven, 2018). His writings have been published in *e-flux*, *Flash Art*, *Third Rail*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Ocula*, and *Spike*.

We reserve the rights to change the program. Up to date information at www.u-jazdowski.pl.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a comprehensive reader on Janek Simon's work edited by Joanna Warsza.

Accompanying Program