Press kit
Poetics of Encryption

Content

Press Release
Poetics of Encryption
17 Feb – 26 May 2024

KW Institute for Contemporary Art is pleased to present its Spring Program 2024 with the extensive group exhibition **Poetics of Encryption**. As part of the *KW Digital Program* the exhibition spans analogue and digital media featuring historic and newly commissioned works over all floors at KW by more than 40 international artists.

Trevor Paglen, *Because Physcial Wounds Heal…*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, Altman Siegel, San Francisco and Pace Gallery © the artist

Though we rely on digital tools for many things, we rarely understand how they work. Moreover, due to the proprietary nature of much corporate tech, even the most curious among us cannot gain deeper insight. Today, we are forced to come to terms with our relative lack of power in the face of inscrutable systems. What symptoms of this personal and political drama register in the cultural field? What moods, symbols, or narrative frames capture the aesthetics and politics of exclusion, occlusion, secrecy, and speculation concerning technology's *inside*? *Poetics of Encryption* builds upon the recent book by Nadim Samman titled *Poetics of Encryption: Art and the Technocene*. It surveys an imaginative landscape marked by *Black Sites*, *Black Boxes*, and *Black Holes*—terms that indicate how technical systems capture users, how they work in stealth, and how they distort cultural space-time. These themes form the basis for three chapters that play out across all gallery floors at KW.

Featuring artists of the exhibition: **Nora Al-Badri, ~~Morehshin Allahyari~~***, **~~American Artist~~***, **Emmanuel Van der Auwera, Gillian Brett, Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion, Juliana Cerqueira Leite, Julian Charrière, Joshua Citarella, Clusterduck, Juan Covelli, Kate Crawford & Vladan Joler, Sterling Crispin, Simon Denny, enorê, Roger Hiorns, Tilman Hornig, Rindon Johnson, Daniel Keller, Andrea Khôra, Jonna Kina, Oliver Laric, Eva & Franco Mattes, Jürgen Mayer H., Most Dismal Swamp, NEW MODELS, Carsten Nicolai, Simone C Niquille, Trevor Paglen, Matthias Planitzer, Jon Rafman, Rachel Rossin, Sebastian Schmieg, Charles Stankievech, Troika, UBERMORGEN, Nico Vascellari, Zheng Mahler**, among others. The exhibition architecture has been made in collaboration with **Jürgen Mayer H. / J. MAYER H. and partners**, **architects**.

Poetics of Encryption is a year-long program in 2023–2024, supported by Volkswagen Group. It is elaborated through the publication, a website featuring three 'web-first' artistic commissions by **Most Dismal Swamp, UBERMORGEN** and **Zheng Mahler** and a conference in 2023. The dedicated website-as-catalogue also features rich media, and a bespoke AI chatbot. The project culminates in the group exhibition on-site at KW in spring 2024. See poeticsofencryption.kw-berlin.de

Benita von Maltzahn, Head of Volkswagen Group Cultural Engagement: "*We are proud to support the Digital Program of KW and the exhibition* Poetics of Encryption*, as we want to give people the opportunity to experience the extensive possibilities of digitalization. How do artists use new technologies, and can we learn from them? Digitalization and AI do not only transform us at Volkswagen, but shape everybody's lives. We are excited to share this journey and exchange with KW and all artists participating in the exhibition.*"

Krist Gruijthuijsen, Director of KW: "*KW sits at the intersection of virtual and material domains, and the creative use of emerging technologies. Exploring, criticizing, or reinventing this space through art is a key issue for the* KW Digital Program*. With* Poetics of Encryption *KW aims to introduce new perspectives on this digital landscape. Showcasing over 40 artists we seek to further stimulate conversations and reflections and to continue shaping our digitized future together.*"

Curator: Nadim Samman
Assistant Curator: Linda Franken
Curatorial Assistant: Lara Scherrieble
Exhibition architecture: in collaboration with Jürgen Mayer H. / J. MAYER H. and partners, architects
————
*The artists, whose names are crossed-out, have chosen to strike against German State-funded institutions and therefore withdraw their participation from the exhibition.

Poetics of Encryption
Curatorial Text

■ is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

Nicholas of Cusa

We rely on digital tools for many things, yet rarely understand how they work. Gaining deeper insight is not always an option. First, due to the proprietary nature of much corporate tech. Second, because understanding how an advanced AI came to generate a particular output can be impossible. Such ignorance and lack of power with respect to encrypted systems is difficult to endure. How does this situation register in art?

This group exhibition builds upon the recent publication *Poetics of Encryption: Art and the Technocene* by Nadim Samman. It explores the *crypt* in encryption, surveying an imaginative landscape marked by *Black Sites*, *Black Boxes*, and *Black Holes*. These terms indicate how emerging tech captures users; how it works in secret; and how it distorts cultural space-time. Three chapters showcase these themes, across all gallery floors at KW. Throughout, the exhibition toggles between enlightened concern and occult dreaming.

Each chapter proposes an imaginative model for where an intelligent, embodied human is placed in relation to the realm of digital secrets and hidden mechanisms. The artworks gathered under the heading *Black Site* explore the state of being *locked in:* captured or contained, buried in a technological grave. *Black Box* explores how artists picture the state of being intellectually *locked out* of ubiquitous consumer and industrial products. Finally, *Black Hole* considers how super-dense digital archives and/or computational processes scramble distinctions between inside and outside (*locked down*), before and after, sense and nonsense.

In the latent space between exclusion, occlusion, secrecy, questing, and speculation concerning technology's *inside*, there unfolds an emergent *poetic of encryption*.

This exhibition features new and historic works spanning analogue and digital media by over 40 international artists. They are set within an architecture by Jürgen Mayer H. / J. MAYER H. and partners, architects. Additionally, a website serves as the project's digital gallery and catalogue. It features three 'web-first' artistic commissions, rich media, a bespoke AI chatbot, and further project documentation. See poeticsofencryption.kw-berlin.de

Featured artists: Nora Al-Badri, ~~Morehshin Allahyari~~*, ~~American Artist~~*, Emmanuel Van der Auwera, Gillian Brett, Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion, Juliana Cerqueira Leite, Julian Charrière, Joshua Citarella, Clusterduck, Juan Covelli, Kate Crawford, Sterling Crispin, Simon Denny, enorê, Roger Hiorns, Tilman Hornig, Rindon Johnson, Vladan Joler, Daniel Keller, Andrea Khôra, Jonna Kina, Oliver Laric, Eva & Franco Mattes, Jürgen Mayer H., Most Dismal Swamp, NEW MODELS, Carsten Nicolai, Simone C Niquille, Trevor Paglen, Matthias Planitzer, Jon Rafman, Rachel Rossin, Sebastian Schmieg, Charles Stankievech, Troika, UBERMORGEN, Nico Vascellari, Zheng Mahler, among others.

Black Site

The artworks on this floor concern the state of being *locked in*. Captured or kidnapped—buried in a technological grave. They are about finding oneself stolen away, and about the labor of escape from this situation. In a related vein, they highlight search and recovery operations, including de-cryption, dis-closure, and more.

Black Site traces the contours of a new underworld. One that artists discover inside a mechanical planet, surrounded by an array of satellites and sensors. Some featured works explore its dark infrastructure, digging through troll caves, cockpits, game-space, and open-pit mines. Others attempt to map this labyrinth, as every escape attempt requires some kind of plan.

Indicative works include the video *Holding Death Close* (2021) by enorê, which dramatizes disorientation and wayfinding through an aesthetic reminiscent of early first-person adventure gaming. Juliana Cerqueira Leite's *SHEE* (2018, 2024) speaks to the architectural continuum between the human body and outer space—and the strange tension between the human digit (the finger) and the *digital*. The sculpture comprises a series of body casts in plaster, produced within a 1:1 scale model of a living system commissioned by the European Space Agency. Elsewhere, Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler's *Calculating Empires* (2023) attempts to chart how power and technology have been intertwined since 1500, through an overwhelming 24-meter diagram.

Black Hole (I)

What is life in the shadow of a data trail? What is death, when a digital body lives on? And how do we make kin with the network object?

Like black holes, super-dense digital archives and algorithmic processes warp cultural space-time. As the internet and powerful AI models devour the known universe, collapsing every kind of difference into the singularity of code, meaning becomes denatured. Today, chimeras and stretched definitions abound. This floor explores the strange figures that artists use to signal the 'event horizon' of *total datafication*.

Eva & Franco Mattes' *Panorama Cat* (2022) is a taxidermy sculpture of a ginger tabby cat, based on a viral 'panorama fail' photograph. It is an icon for the digital distortion of nature and culture, and the convergence of code and nonsense. In Juan Covelli's *Speculative Treasure* (2020-2022) a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN) appears to fill in important blanks in Columbia's archaeological heritage, replacing looted sculptures with novel artifacts informed by training data based on the national collection. Emmanuel Van der Auwera's *VideoSculpture XXV (Archons)* (2022) offers unsettling reflections on the notions of digital immortality, post-truth, and deepfakes. Meanwhile, Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion's animated musical video *IDLE (acts α and ß)* (2023) dramatizes the creepy self-regard of a nascent Artificial General Intelligence (AGI).

Black Hole (II)

Like black holes, super-dense digital archives and algorithmic processes warp cultural space-time. This floor catalogues the images that artists use to signal the 'event horizon' of *total datafication*. These chimeras stalk the social, economic, and political landscape—ecstatic conspiracies and post-truths that mark a point of no return.

Hyperlinked space is, for the most part, flat, with seemingly infinite pathways between sites and values. This suggests a lack of privileged vantage points from which to survey a scene. The 'big

tent' conspiracies of Web 2.0, such as QAnon, run on such tracks, building ever more powerful connections into their web of (non)sense-making while sustaining all manner of contradictions.

Clusterduck's *The Detective Wall (2023)* teeters on the edge of misadventure. The work attempts to make sense of the recent memescape by bringing the art historian Aby Warburg's celebrated approach to image analysis together with the insanity of a TV detective's 'crazy wall'. Joshua Citarella's *e-deologies* (2020–2023) speaks to the power of digital media to deform political life. The work comprises a series of flags, whose respective heraldries each symbolize a strange hybrid. From 'Anarcho-Capitalist Voluntarist Pacificism' to 'Left Egoist Transhumanism', the wild combinations are all too real—gathered from political message boards. Nearby, Andrea Khôra's new commission, *RAPTURE* (2024), explores the unlikely convergence of hallucinations and capitalism through the prism of Silicon Valley's rising enthusiasm for psychedelic chemicals. Her work employs machine learning visuals inspired by the artist's own ketamine deep dives.

Black Box

Black Box explores how artists picture being *locked out* of ubiquitous products and control systems.

A black box is a device that can be viewed in terms of input and output, observing only their pattern, without any knowledge of a conversion mechanism. What happens inside it is opaque, veiled in shadow: *black*. Our encounters with these occult agents represent a locus of desire and disappointment in contemporary technoculture. In this section, featured artworks stage tensions between a visible interface and an opaque backend. Some also consider how a rhetoric of transparency can, in fact, obscure the truth.

Eva and Franco Mattes' *P2P* (2022) is a server connected to the open Internet, distributing a digital artwork as a torrent through the peer-to-peer network. The server has no output, and so the register of the piece is limited to blinking lights and the noise of the cooling fans. What else is going on behind the scenes? Trevor Paglen's *Faces of ImageNet* (2022) demonstrates inherent biases in the emerging technology of facial recognition, drawing out concrete expressions of algorithmic racism, misogyny and more, latent in the AI's training data, as it categorizes visitors. Elsewhere, Tilman Hornig's *GlassBook* (2013–2023) series stages the aesthetic sleight of hand surrounding computation. To what extent are smartphones, laptops and other systems really transparent mediators of reality?

Artist Biographies

See kw-berlin.de/biographies for all artist biographies

Public Program

Conversation:
Calculating Empires: A Genealogy of Technology and Power, 1500-2025
with Kate Crawford and Nadim Samman
18 February 24, 4 pm

Reading Performanc:
Secret Words and Related Stories
with Jonna Kina and guests
6 March 24, 7 pm

Performance Lecture:
Surveillance as Material
with Rindon Johnson
20 March 24, 7 pm

Poetics of Encryption x panke.gallery
Conversation and Live Set
11 April 24, 8 pm
Venue: panke.gallery and Panke Club

Book Launch:
The Desert Turned to Glass
with Charles Stankievech and Nadim Samman
27 April 24

Concert
Early Labyrinth
27 April 24, 8 pm

Conversation:
Inhabiting SHEE
with Juliana Cerqueira Leite and Dr. Barbara Imhof
26 May 24, 4 pm

Education and Art Mediation

KW's education and art mediation program takes up themes and questions from the institution's wide-ranging artistic exhibition and event program and develops them further together with visitors, children, youth and adults trying to expand in its own formats on themes sparked within the program. This approach is applied in workshops, guided tours, and long-term cooperations with multiple groups. We work with high schools, universities, artists, art mediators, researchers and different communities from Berlin in various formats throughout the year.

Long-term education and mediation projects are developed and realized together with our respective partners. These cooperations aim to build a mutual space for action that appreciates and activates diverse bodies of knowledge and experience and facilitates both collective and individual approaches to different themes and questions related to the artistic program.

Guided Tour for teachers
29 February 24, 4.30–6 pm

Open studio for children and adults
with Hirmiz Akman
3 March 24, 1–5 pm
7 April 24, 1–5 pm
5 May 24, 1–5 pm

Curator's Tour
with Nadim Samman
14 March 24, 7 pm

Workshop Special:
Movement research and tour through the exhibition Poetics of Encryption
with Alvin Collantes and KW mediators

Holiday workshop:
From reality to unreality and back again
with Hirmiz Akman
For young people from 13–18 years of age
25–28 March 24, 11 am – 3 pm each

Curator's Tour
with Linda Franken
25 April 24, 7 pm

Public guided tour with German Sign Language
with Anjouna Novak
5 May 24, 2–2.30 pm

Focus Tour
9 May 24, 6 pm

Curator's Tour
with Lara Scherrieble
16 May 24, 7 pm

Plain Language and Discovery Questions
Along with the Spring Program, exhibit content will be offered in plain language. The text can be accessed directly via the website or QR codes in the exhibition. We would like to reach all visitors with our program. For further inspiration, you will also find questions that can be used to discover the exhibition content in a playful way.

Dialogs with KW Guides
Monday–Friday during regular opening hours
Participation included in the exhibition ticket
Without prior registration
During the week, KW guides are present in the exhibitions during regular opening hours. Visitors are invited to ask the guides questions, talk to them about the exhibitions and exchange perspectives.

Public guided tours at the weekend
Every weekend experienced art educators guide visitors through the current exhibition at KW. The tours take place Saturdays at 4 pm in English and Sundays at 4 pm in German. Without prior registration and in cooperation with Museumsdienst Berlin.

More information online.

General Information

Opening Hours
Wednesday – Monday 11 am – 7 pm
Thursday 11 am – 9 pm
Closed on Tuesday

Admission
10 € / reduced 6 €
berlinpass holders 4 €

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VOLKSWAGEN GROUP

The exhibition *Poetics of Encryption* is supported by Apalazzo, Blessed Foundation, max goelitz, Harlan Levey Projects, and Sprüth Magers. The exhibition is initiated by KW and a new iteration will be shown at Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen in late 2024.

Media partners

Yorck Kinogruppe · **arte** · BERLINARTLINK

Titles and exhibition dates are subject to change.