

Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst

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r u s s
H A U S
für Medienkunst

Clara Jo

MIRO
R
B
TOUCH

January 27 – March 27 2022

ENGLISH

MIRROR-TOUCH

Clara Jo's solo exhibition *Mirror-Touch* consists of complex, immersive video installations that entangle the senses and the constructed sociopolitical relationships embedded within human experience, while engaging with sensitive historical and ontological narratives.

The exhibition's title is borrowed from psychology, describing a rare experience of tactile sensation on one's body induced by seeing someone else being touched. In the context of the exhibition, the idea of "mirror-touch" stands as a strong metaphor or desire for empathy—a key notion in Jo's oeuvre.

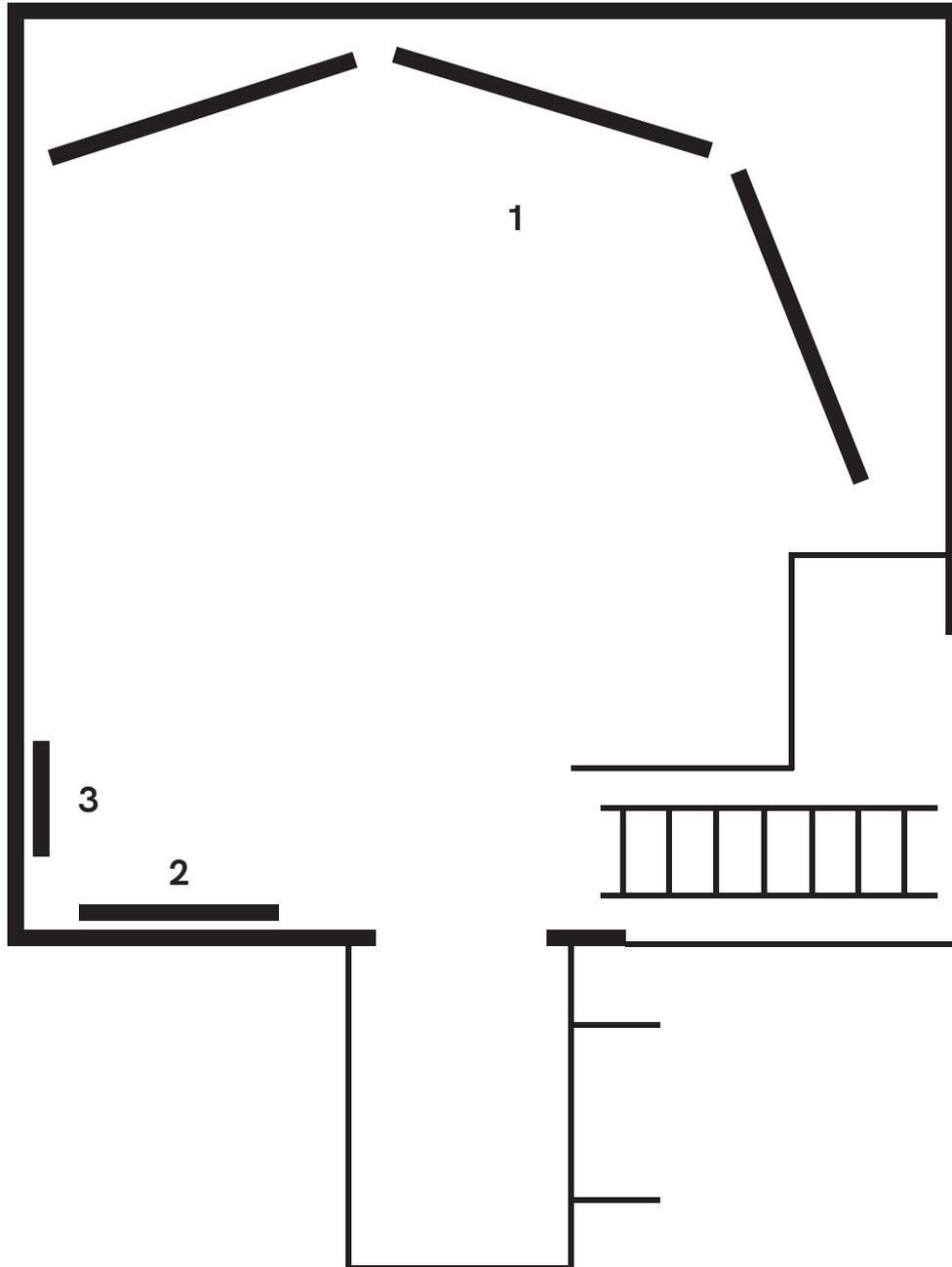
Between Lived Experience and Simulated Presence (2021), a research-based work newly commissioned by the Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art, blurs boundaries that separate interior experiences to promote healing and transformation. The project involved collaboration with Dr. Lucia Valmaggia's Virtual Reality Lab at King's College London, where clinical psychologists design VR treatment environments for individuals experiencing conditions such as psychosis and schizophrenia. The resulting video work explores how digital worlds could serve as collaborative spaces to understand one another's lived experience. A second chapter of the installation, titled *The Wallpaper Stories*, acts as a narrative anchor for these subjective healing journeys. It presents a fictional rendering of British painter Mary Barnes' 1973 memoir, which follows her mental health journey to seek alternative spiritual experiences and personal mythologies. Jo approaches these historical and contemporary testimonies of lived experience and their expressions as acts of consciousness itself, lived in the very moment.

The large-scale installation *De Anima* (2018–21) spans documentary and animation and features a dreamlike narrative examining how various gendered, racialized, economic, and metabolic systems embedded within the global health system—which have become especially apparent during the COVID-19 crisis—drive fear of contamination from the nonhuman world. The work's departure point is Jo's 2018 field research in Myanmar with Smithsonian wildlife veterinarians who were hunting for new strains of coronaviruses to predict their pandemic potential. The sacred caves depicted in *De Anima* are both high-risk interfaces as well as sites of spiritual encounter between humans and animals, science and religion, nature and politics—interfaces where ecosystems cross and feed into global conflict. This behind-the-scenes work had been underway for years, and sheds light on the inevitable: not of a why but an unknown when—offering an ominous prelude to the current global health crisis. Recorded in Myanmar, Kenya, and France, the images and sounds featured in *De Anima* that once felt so "far away" now deeply resonate in the everyday.

Jo's newly commissioned work continues her ongoing artistic investigations around the idea of "ontological insecurity"—a strong feeling of uncertainty about ways of being in the world.

Between Lived Experience and Simulated Presence and *De Anima* both expose subtexts that reveal deeper issues embedded within society at large, namely the neglect and treatment of health beyond the human in an era of accelerated globalization. The *Mirror-Touch* exhibition at the Edith-Russ-Haus addresses urgent questions about crossing physical and psychological thresholds and our shared responsibility for the future health of our global community.

Clara Jo is a Berlin-based artist and a 2020 recipient of the Media Art Grant from the Foundation of Lower Saxony at the Edith-Russ-Haus.



1

DE ANIMA

2021

Experimental 3-channel installation, stereo sound
30:48

English with German subtitles

De Anima (2018–21) is a large-scale video installation that has revealed itself as an ominous prelude to the current state of global affairs.

The work's departure point is Jo's field research in Myanmar back in 2018 with Smithsonian wildlife veterinarians who were hunting for new coronavirus strains to predict their pandemic potential. The sacred caves depicted in *De Anima* are both high-risk interfaces as well as sites of spiritual encounter between humans and animals, science and religion, nature and politics—interfaces where ecosystems cross and feed into global conflict.

Clara Jo says about her project: "My film *De Anima* began with conversations with Smithsonian wildlife veterinarians back in 2017. For several years, their Global Health Program had been spearheading USAID-backed programs in Myanmar and Kenya to prevent and detect infectious diseases at their source before large-scale epidemics occur. In 2018, the Smithsonian team invited me to Myanmar, where they were hunting for new strains of coronaviruses transmitted from bats to humans to predict their pandemic potential. I followed the team from one sampling location to the next. They examined oral swabs as well as blood, urine, and feces for any signs of genetic material from dangerous virus families during a major parallel sampling of bats and humans. The metabolic systems are cyclic: animals and humans consume other animals and elements of the landscape; wet markets sell live fish for human consumption; cockroaches feed on bat feces

for nourishment; local communities collect guano for monetary sustenance; biological samples from both animals and humans are collected for scientific analysis; which then finally informs public health policies. The Smithsonian's ongoing work on emerging zoonotic outbreak and viral surveillance aims to move countries away from a reactive post-outbreak response to a proactive approach in which pathogens of pandemic potentials are discovered at their source before large-scale epidemics occur in people."

The second half of *De Anima* was filmed in Kenya in 2019 at the Ol Jogi Wildlife Conservancy — Kenya's second largest rhino sanctuary. Scientists conducted conservation studies to optimize reproduction of the endangered Eastern black rhino via the collection and analysis of rhino feces in response to the poaching pandemic. The main driver for rhino horn is Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and is procured by international poaching cartels as a highly valuable status symbol in Asia. The medicinal and spiritual value of rhino horn is derived from what the rhino eats and the power of the rhino themselves, which when displaced from its original context becomes entangled in both local and international economic systems. Increased human-animal interactions coupled with rapid deforestation and urbanization has not only led to the emergence and spread of zoonotic pathogens, but also orphaned wild animals who are in need of critical care. At Ol Jogi's Rehabilitation Centre, such animals are cared for with the intent of releasing them back into the wild. In contrast to Myanmar, here is a place of care and intimacy, where humans create familial bonds with wild animals who had been injured due to human-animal conflict.

The camera traverses through these rich, biodiverse landscapes at the mercy of nature. These encounters reveal the artifice of how humans perceive and construct nature. In a short montage in the middle of the film, the

manicured Monet Gardens in Giverny, France, are portrayed because of its history as a highly contested place where locals were once opposed to introducing these strange, exotic plants for fear of poisoning the water.

Three fictional CG characters narrate this journey to a recent past in Myanmar, Kenya, and France where both physical and psychological borders were open and porous. The three CG character's dialogue—based on real-life interviews with scientists and animal caretakers—introduce each section of the film, straddling both the prophetic past and fragile present. Their hybrid physicalities give voice to these very disenfranchised elements (the nonhuman, landscape, wild) that are oftentimes silenced within anthropocentric narratives.

De Anima exposes a reality that is not a novel phenomena to the current state of militarization of public health, but rather a subtext to the pandemic that reveals deeper issues embedded within society. Namely that we are neglecting environmental health in an era of accelerated globalization. *De Anima* addresses urgent questions such as how we can imagine a world in which physical and psychological borders are broken down; how to take a collective stance in order to prepare for the inevitability of future pandemics without political inequity and corruption; and how to combat xenophobic rhetoric about the origins of COVID.

De Anima relays the message that we all must share responsibility for the future of our health as a global community."

— Clara Jo

Credits:

Director, Producer, Camera, Sound, CG

Characters, Edit: Clara Jo

Producer: Joseph Constable

Co-Producer: Yue Wang

CG: Marta Stražičić

Sound Mix: Francesco Cimino

German Subtitles: Kristin Müller

Supported by:

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Berlin Senatsverwaltung Für Kultur Und Europa

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International Documentary Film Festival

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Steven Githuthu

Mpala Research Centre

Ol Jogi Wildlife Conservancy And The Rangers

Richard Childers And The Pierce Lab At Harvard University

Special Thanks France:

Fondation Claude Monet

Cité Internationale Des Arts Paris

2

DE ANIMA

2021

2 digital prints on semigloss paper, UV protective varnish on Dibond aluminum plate

112 cm × 200 cm

84 cm × 150 cm

3

WE WILL TAME THESE LITTLE DEMONS SO THAT THEY BECOME THE ANGELS OF YOUR SUCCESS

2021

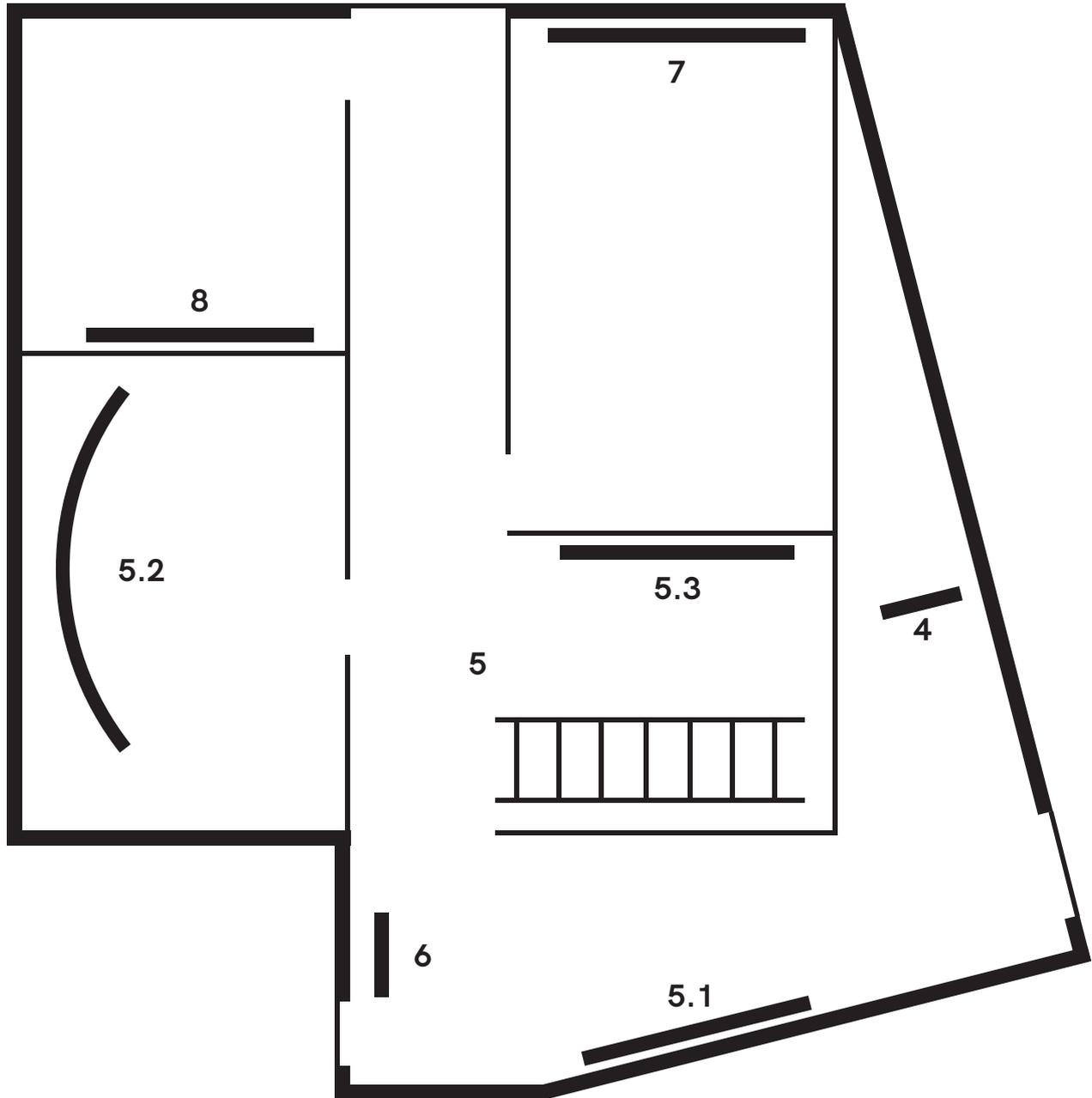
3 screenprints on glass

39cm × 27cm

“When I returned from my first trip from Myanmar back in 2018, it was a struggle to explain to friends and colleagues the meaning of “emerging zoonotic disease”, “high-risk human-animal interface”, and “viral surveillance”. We soon became oversaturated with these words and images. I wanted to finish editing *De Anima* in early 2020 until lockdown, which forced me to look at my material with fresh eyes. It was difficult to imagine living in a Europe with these new disciplinary measures of surveillance and state control. The odor of the bat guano in those dark, sacred religious caves is still inscribed in my memory, similar to how COVID-19, another invisible and pervasive force, is now imprinting new memories. Images and sounds that once felt so “far away” now deeply resonate in the everyday.

I then chose to tell a story of intimacy and transparency. These images reflect on my time while in confinement in Paris. I felt the strangeness of deciphering emotions through eyes behind masks. In these moments, I questioned the fragility of global solidarity and nationalist isolation; whether trust could be restored with the media, science, and politicians; and how new information would flow, deep within our own politicized bodies and channeling into virtual networks.”

—Clara Jo



4

Two documentaries by King's College about VR Lab

REACH

3:46 min

King's College London and 12 schools in South London have come together to launch REACH, a pioneering project exploring mental health and resilience in young people.

Credits: Banyak Films

German voice over: Annekathrin Bach, Andreas Dobberkau

VIRTUAL REALITY LAB

3:48 min

The KCL Virtual Reality Lab is developing virtual reality environments to research and provide therapy for people with psychosis.

Credits: Banyak Films

German voice over: Annekathrin Bach, Andreas Dobberkau

5

BETWEEN LIVED EXPERIENCE AND SIMULATED PRESENCE

2021

3-chapter video installation, stereo sound
English with German subtitles

Director, Producer: Clara Jo

5.1

BETWEEN LIVED EXPERIENCE AND SIMULATED PRESENCE CHAPTER 1: SEPARATION

6:37 min

Clara Jo worked closely with Dr. Lucia Valmaggia and Jerome Di Pietro at the VR Lab at King's College London to explore how digital worlds could serve as collaborative spaces to gain closer proximity to testimonies of lived experience. This first chapter remixes King's VR Lab treatment environments, voiceovers of individuals with lived experience feeling unwell, and live footage that dips in and out of reality. The perspectives constantly shift and are filtered through the audience: whether that be of the therapist, patient, machine. These scenarios play out in a virtual "Ontological Theater" — a trial-and-error performative experimentation.

"I was drawn to Lucia's work because it allows clinicians and individuals to look at their experiences in the moment within controlled environments, instead of asking to recall previous experiences in a more talk-therapy style. The sense of 'presence' that individuals experience while immersed in these virtual environments creates both emotional and physical responses. The mind and body behave as if it's in the real world by taking new risks. This ultimately aims to build confidence to bridge the virtual and real-life situations. For the past two years, I have also been speaking with different individuals in London about their lived experiences, to learn more about their stories and thoughts about the potentials of VR-assisted Therapy. "

—Clara Jo

Camera, Sound, Edit: Clara Jo

Voice Actors: Lukman Ipese, Alexandra Jenkins, and Sibel Suleyman

Footage courtesy of King's College London VR Lab

5.2

**BETWEEN LIVED EXPERIENCE AND
SIMULATED PRESENCE****CHAPTER 2: THE WALLPAPER STORIES**

13:10 min

The Wallpaper Stories is an artistic interpretation of the book „Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness“ (1973) which chronicles the tumultuous yet symbiotic relationship between British painter Mary Barnes and her American therapist Joseph Berke. In this fictional rendering, Mary, suffering from schizophrenia, embarks on a journey to explore her inner world deep within her own psyche, in order to seek alternative spiritual experiences and create her own personal mythology. The story is viewed through both Mary and Joseph’s perspectives. This chapter is a historical reference of lived experience reconceptualizing inner experiences using a mythic perspective with a very different emotional quality. Ontological distinctions between self and other, interior and exterior become blurred.

Painting was an important way for Barnes to tap into her unconscious to express her lived experience to the outside world. Her early picture stories became known as “The Wallpaper Stories”. The second half is a re-interpretation of one of these stories: “The Egg on the Sea”. Embedded throughout this chapter are very personal symbols and mythologies to Jo that she encountered throughout her research culled from a wide range of sources: animal hybrids in Korean folk painting and German folklore, religious Renaissance painting, zombie movies, and especially the Upright Tarot Star Card, which was pulled by Jo in a Tarot Card reading.

Mary was a resident at Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing’s Kingsley Hall in East London, where Joseph Berke was her therapist. Laing discouraged patients from taking

anti-psychotic drugs, and instead offered support through alternative community-based therapeutic models that encouraged residents to live out their inner journeys. Although the founders of this movement from the 1960s advocated for a more humane and almost utopian approach to the field of psychiatry, it soon extinguished as one of its propagated ideas - that psychosis could actually be a positive and life-enhancing experience - caused several tragic deaths and relapses in serious cases.

The work speculates how clinical approaches and relationships that privilege personal connection can inform healing and transformation.

Visual Production, Game Development, and CG Lead: Agnete Morell, Roman Steinmetz, and Jannis Szeder

Character Artist and Rigger: Marta Stražičić
Music and Sound FX: Pi Lubanjice 🦋🦋🦋 (Ivana Picek) - including excerpts from songs 🎵 (intro) and T.M.C. (Trophæum Mariano-Cellense) from the album 🦋 (časna lubanjska) by Pi

Text excerpts are from “Two Accounts of a Journey Through Madness” (1973) by Mary Barnes

5.3

BETWEEN LIVED EXPERIENCE AND SIMULATED PRESENCE CHAPTER 3: RETURN

8:43 min

King's VR Lab environments are re-mixed with testimonies of healing and transformation. Imagined audiences have agency to determine outcomes and are given the opportunity to repeat scenes and reproduce exactly the same experience over and over, but try different ways of being. They return to the ordinary world, relinquish the magical and supernatural encountered in *Chapter 2: The Wallpaper Stories*, and integrate those experiences into everyday life.

Camera, Sound, Edit: Clara Jo

Voice Actors: Lukman Ipese, Alexandra Jenkins, and Sibel Suleyman

Footage courtesy of King's College London VR Lab

Between Lived Experience and Simulated Presence is a collaboration between King's College London's Virtual Reality Lab at the Department of Psychology; the Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries; and Clara Jo as part of King's Artists programme and supported by the Culture team at King's. This project would not be possible without the invaluable support and collaboration with Dr Lucia Valmaggia (Head of Virtual Reality Lab, King's College London), Jerome Di Pietro (Virtual Reality Lab Developer, King's College London), and the individuals with lived experience who contributed their stories and experiences.

Commissioned by Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst

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King's Artists

Faculty of Arts & Humanities at King's College London

Berlin Senatsverwaltung Für Kultur Und Europa
NEUSTART KULTUR – Stiftung Kunstfonds

Jan van Eyck Academie

5.4

FIERY RINGS OF PURKINJE

Year: 2021

Wall sculpture, powder coated steel

92 cm × 50 cm

The eponym fiery rings of Purkinje refers to the Bohemian physiologist Jan Evangelista Purkyně (1787–1869), who is credited with being the first to describe the concomitant phenomenon in his textbook of 1823. The phenomenon consists of two large rings that can be seen after rapid convergence movements of the eyes, especially in a dark environment. It is classified as a type of convergence phosphene, which is in turn classified as an entoptic phenomenon or a physiological illusion. Because of its occurrence in a dark environment, the phenomenon is also classified as a closed-eye hallucination (although the term closed-eye illusion might be more appropriate). The mediation of this phenomenon is associated with the stretching of the optic nerve and the region of the papillae.

Quote from Jan Dirk Blom: *A Dictionary of Hallucinations*, Springer, 2010, in: p.191.

6 CATHEDRAL

2017

1-channel HD Video, stereo sound

12:44 min

The main protagonist of this short film is the medieval Cathedral Ruins in Hamar, which were destroyed by the Swedes in the 16-century and later covered by a modernist glass structure by the Norwegian government. Against an uncanny soundtrack of looped trap beats, the film interrogates how images—filtered and mediated through the senses—act as conduits for sensory experience across various historicized sites in Norway and Germany.

Credits:

Director, Camera, Sound, Edit: Clara Jo

Special Thanks: Izzy Ment, Rike Scheffler, Sung Tieu, and Quynh Vantu

7 FFS STUDIOS

2013

1 channel HD Video, stereo sound

11:19 min

Jo's earlier work *FFS Studios* continues her ongoing artistic investigations around the idea of "ontological insecurity"—a strong feeling of uncertainty about ways of being in the world. This single-channel video is an intimate portrait of actress Luise Helm that captures a voice-over session for a popular American television show as it's dubbed into German from English. The unseen character's uncanny presence in the film, Helm's intense emotional interpretation of this protagonist, and the viewer together create an intimate space of new narrative possibility and a rather

intense sense of character deconstruction and construction.

Credits:

Featuring: Luise Helm

Director, Sound, Edit: Clara Jo

Camera: Jon Britt

Aquarium: EXCERPTS FROM DE ANIMA, THE PROTAGONISTS

2021

Video animation, loop

CLARA JO | Biography

*1986 (US)

Lives in Berlin

Jo received a B.A. from Bard College (New York), and her master class from the Institut für Raumexperimente / UdK Berlin.

She has exhibited and screened her work at the Royal Academy of Arts (London), Institute of Contemporary Arts (London), Arsenal - Institute for Film and Video Art (Berlin), Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Hamburger Bahnhof, Neue Nationalgalerie, Dahlem Museums, Museum for Photography), Savvy Contemporary (Berlin), Akademie der Künste (Berlin), and the Alliance Ethio-Française d'Addis-Abeba, Ethiopia.

She is currently the 2021-22 Vroman Fellow at the Jan van Eyck Academie (Maastricht). From 2020-21, she was a fellow at the Akademie Schloss Solitude (Stuttgart). In 2018, she received the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship.

She has presented her work on panels at the Royal Academy of Arts (London), King's College (London), The Barbican Centre/The Trampery (London), the Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL London), and the National Museum of Denmark (Copenhagen).

Colophon

Production:

Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst

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Assistant: Amy Sprigade

German voice over: Annekathrin Bach, Andreas Dobberkau

Graphic design: Katarina Šević, Anna Mándoki

Educational programme: Sandrine Teuber, Jan Blum

Technical realisation: Carlo Bas Sancho, Mathis Oesterlen

Press: Edith-Russ-Haus

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