

Being in the Garden of the Forking Paths

Salomé Chatriot, CROSSLUCID und Pola Sieverding

17.7. - 26.8.2024

Text by Prof. Dr. Marie-France Rafael

My thumb presses on the screen of my smartphone. I slowly click through the windows that open here and there, continually steering me in a different direction. Sometimes I forget what I started with. I lose myself, get stuck somewhere, click elsewhere, and end up in another place again. Quickly, a few minutes turn into a quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour, and time itself becomes increasingly relative. With my thumb, I click from app to app, page to page, hyperlink to hyperlink. With each click, new possibilities of "different futures, different times, which also proliferate and branch out" open up to me—sometimes consciously, sometimes less so. A garden of forking paths—a labyrinth, as Jorge Luis Borges described in his eponymous short story in 1941—a hypertext avant la lettre.

The engagement with a seemingly endless variety of possibilities in light of new digital technologies and (generative) artificial intelligence, which branch out in countless directions and each lead to different futures, underpins the exhibition *Being in the Garden of the Forking Paths* at the OFFICE IMPART gallery. In this complex landscape, the three, albeit very different, artistic positions of Salomé Chatriot, CROSSLUCID, and Pola Sieverding seem to converge into a common path: a path of touch or encounters between bodies and machines and new hybrid gestures.

I look down at my hands, which tightly grasp my phone. Automatically, I swipe my thumb across the screen. My fingers slowly swipe up and down. Abruptly, I press the button on the right side, and the screen goes black. Something pops up on my screen again, and almost automatically, I start performing my usual gestures. Swiping, tapping, clicking, always along the shiny glass surface at the end of my hand, which almost symbiotically threatens to merge with it.

Movements and gestures. As automatic as breathing.

Salomé Chatriot's works also breathe. In her 3D video diptych *Breathing Patterns* (2023), amorphous shapes move in breath-like frequencies. The iridescent figures in various flesh-colored tones, reminiscent of a lung, a vagina, or even exoskeleton-like shells, can best be described as pre-fossils; beings that refer to the existence of a pre-temporality before any life. Chatriot's works oscillate between techno-mythologies and speculative future scenarios.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of the Forking Paths* (1942). In: Borges, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, Munich: Hanser, 2000, pp. 161-173, here p. 170.

My finger hovers in the air, having just finished typing a message and pressed send. What kind of gestures do I perform most of my day, and do I have control over these gestures, or do the gestures control me? And isn't it the case that in times of changing living conditions under the auspices of the digital and the ever-present discussions about the role of humans in relation to AI, too little attention is paid to the question of gesture and body, especially the hands in dealing with digital technologies?

It is all the more telling, then, that in the photo series *touche-touche* (2023) by artist Pola Sieverding, the gesture of touch is so centrally staged. These are images of arms and hands touching, merging, intertwining, and weaving before a black background. The strength emanating from these touches is emphasized by the diagonal formed by the hands and arms. They are both the formal and thematic focus of the images. The French sociologist Michel de Certeau notes that hands, which "are made for the plow, the typewriter, or the milling machine," cannot help but "connect humans [...] with their environment."² The hands create a space, or one could almost speak of the hands as a 'place of tenderness,' as "the hands," de Certeau continues, "carry within them a knowledge of everyday things and are aware of nameless caresses or efforts; and they have the ability to say what the intellect has not yet or no longer found the words for."³

Pola Sieverding's work *touche-touche* focuses on this place of tenderness, of touch—especially in light of digital technologies, with, through, and on which we perform our everyday gestures: thanks to our hands.

I feel the weight of the metal in my hand, or is it my hand that becomes heavy from holding my smartphone? Slowly, I loosen my grip a bit. I swipe my fingers across the touchscreen. I accidentally take a picture. I click on it. A selfie, even. But more of my lower face. I press delete.

The works *Landscapes* (2021) by the artist collective CROSSLUCID are images created using generative AI and can be described as an in-between or, as the artists themselves put it, images "between portrait, still life, and expressionistic topography." And as the title suggests, the images unfold "landscapes" that, thinking back to Borges, unite different futures and times of strange and fragile bio-tech bodies. It becomes clear in CROSSLUCID's works that with new, generatively produced digital images, attention has shifted from the visible to movement and algorithmic processing. These images, which continuously adapt and change, force a reevaluation of visibility.

My thumb aches slightly. I briefly let go of my smartphone and massage my hands, stroking my fingers. While doing so, I think about the here and now I am in and what other times I have just left, or which futures await me, converge, and branch out.

² De Certeau, Michel: *GlaubensSchwachheit*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2009. S. 35.

³ Ebd.