“[I]n the image of …”

The exhibition *[I]n the image of …* explores communication technology’s increasing abstraction of language, space, and culture. Creating a multidimensional experience, the exhibit presents artworks as worlds within worlds, portals to other spaces and experiences.[[1]](#endnote-2) With the use of augmented and virtual reality, 3D imaging, and software, the artworks expand upon the definitions of traditional genres such as sculpture, painting, photography, and cinema.

The conceptual underpinning of the exhibition is an exploration of the foundations of language at the central axis of communication and space. The evolution of writing systems uncovers new territory for a shared experience. In this context, the creation of a shared experience is dependent on the technology defined as language and its writing system. That technology may fail, as our individual perception of any shared experience is reliant on the *Umwelt* of our subjective interpretation.[[2]](#endnote-3) Our shared experience lies in our engagement with the apparatus, not in the image itself; content is not the same as that engagement.

The theme of the exhibition is rooted in the abstraction of language, as well as in the development and evolution of writing systems that utilize the image as a component of communication.

Linear writing systems were invented to provide a rational explication of the actions within images. Early civilizations developed writing systems for the purpose of recording transactions regarding possessions and property—in essence, creating provenance. The objects holding these coded recordings give us tremendous insights into the daily life of these societies.[[3]](#endnote-4) Umberto Eco, in his *Theory of Semiotics*, states that every cultural phenomenon can be studied as communication.[[4]](#endnote-5) The earliest writing systems evolved independently, yet nearly simultaneously, in Egypt and Mesopotamia around 3500 bce. The first written communications of this type were representational, meaning they depended on an image to rationally articulate procedures. As the need for more abstract communication and recording evolved, these image-based systems proved insufficient and a more abstract system emerged: cuneiform, the world’s first known writing system. In this system, “letters” are wedge-shaped marks that were impressed into clay tablets by using a reed stylus. Cuneiform script was adopted by various civilizations, allowing for the first time a widely shareable communication that removed the barriers of not having a written language.[[5]](#endnote-6)

Moving forward to our current Internet-driven communication platform, we can see the evolution of writing systems and the links to the universal code which first introduced written language into programming languages, operating systems, software, and algorithms. As we thread these codices together, we understand them as components of a shared communication technology. Software and programming codes are developed in what is called natural language programming. These codes are labeled “languages” because of their underlying structure of vocabulary and syntax. Technology is, among other things, a set of tools that address the expanding abstract thinking of our societies and the resulting expanded need to record. These languages are built within a syntax and reflect the relational context of a true shared experience. This shared experience is the use of the technology apparatus to reveal the image or data. Possibly most important to the underlying concept of the exhibition, coding allows for communication with a machine.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger proposes in his work *The Questions Concerning Technology*: “Likewise, the essence of technology is by no means anything technological. Thus we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it. Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology.” [[6]](#endnote-7)To further understand the nature of technology we must follow its revealing characteristics. Heidegger proposes we should look at the causes of technology, not just at the way we use it. To find its essence we need to look beyond the source and understand its uses and purposes, and to examine our beliefs, and the ideas that we wish to convey. This methodology affirms the effect of syntax in the structuring of communication: everything has cause and effect, a place in a sequence that illuminates a process in a continuum.

The title of the exhibition, *[I]n the Image of …* , is a paraphrase of the biblical text “Man is made in the image of God.”[[7]](#endnote-8) The syntax suggests an action: God is locating the image of man within the image of himself. “Man is made in the image of God” is, in effect, a dimensional metaphor: one body cannot represent another unless the two resemble each other.[[8]](#endnote-9) The statement directs the readers to find the image of God through images of themselves. These images are projections of self in relation to events; each image that is pulled from the mental data bank is in transit. It is only possible to find the image of God within the myriad images of man.

The exhibition’s method is rooted in the action of engagement with artworks through a technology. There is an “in between”—an active piece of the abstract—before that engagement takes place. Regardless of the physical presence of the works, they offer a choice in the level of engagement. To further establish the relationship of language to the structuring of the exhibition, each art object is addressed as a happening, eliciting an understanding that the happening is an artifact of the artist’s methods. Unlike their historical predecessors—Artaud, the theater of the absurd, Surrealism, Dada—these happenings deal with perception, the object in action.[[9]](#endnote-10) The abstracted object is no longer more important than those who make it or those who witness it. Artists find themselves in a relationship with both the material and the spectator, recognizing that the structure is assigned to the perception of the viewer. These happenings merge the artist and the audience into the action of production, rather than in the presentation of an object or concept by the former for viewing by the latter. The physical composition of the exhibition is relational and best described as a process of experience that gains in momentum, building upon information positioned on all sides of the happening.[[10]](#endnote-11)

The artworks in *[I]n the image of …* build upon the art canon as a relational process embedded within a continuum. They align with the idea that when objects are next to each other, they form another complex, just as we understand language as a complex sequencing of images or coded glyphs that record and inform events or other information.

Michael Rees’s works combine figuration, language, technology, and social space. His work *Pneumatopia: Synthetic Cells* (2018) proposes an equation supporting the idea of object-oriented ontology. Rees coined the term “Pneumatopia” to describe a work made up of two concepts whose juxtaposition creates new meaning.[[11]](#endnote-12) “*Neuma*,” an ancient Greek word for “breath,” also relates to “spirit” or “soul”;[[12]](#endnote-13) a utopia is an imagined place or state of being in which everything is perfect.[[13]](#endnote-14) The word derives from Sir Thomas More’s social satire from 1516, *Utopia*; he coined it from the Greek *ou-topos*, meaning “no place” or “nowhere.” His original title was *Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*. [“A truly golden little book, no less beneficial than entertaining, of a republic’s best state and of the new island Utopia”] was meant to be satirical.[[14]](#endnote-15) Utopia is, in essence, an immanence: conceptually it is ever present yet practically it is unattainable.[[15]](#endnote-16) “Pneumatopia” incites an imaginary destination located in the experiential.

Rees’s *Pneumatopia: Synthetic Cell* is a modular sculptural system combining air-inflated, inkjet-printed PVC vinyl forms and an augmented-reality application. The sculptures are cube-like structures ranging in size from 10 x 10 to 12 x 12 feet. Each is a discrete entity supplied with a unique code that accesses an animation embedded in a pattern on one panel. As large inflatable translucent structures that adapt and interact directly with the surrounding areas by creating impromptu passageways and overlapping color-infused shapes, the sculptures transform the exhibition space. The inflatable plastic material of the sculptures suggests simplicity, recalling childhood memories of multicolored beach balls or perhaps the inflatable jumping rooms at local carnivals. While Rees’s inflatables are not penetrable, they evoke a shared memory of joy from a time that has since past, teasing the viewer’s sense of play.

Our minds activate the object. Juxtaposed to this synesthetic perceptual engagement, the sculpture can also be activated through augmented reality, a technology that superimposes a computer-generated image on a user’s view of the real world, providing a composite of the sculpture with the image. The viewer uses an apparatus, a smart tablet, to access an animated interactive image. When the image appears on the tablet screen, there is a perceived flattening effect of the three-dimensional sculpture as a result of the viewers focus on the moving image from their screen. Each sculpture is layered with an embedded code that, when accessed through the augmented-reality application, reveals a unique image of a living species: a fly, a rooster, a pig, animated characters that fly, walk, and roll, activities controlled by the viewer. The layering of other living species onto the sculpture brings other concepts into play. It is in the extension of space through the use of augmented reality that the animated species exist. Each species within *Pneumatopia* exists in a virtual state of being that is reliant on the surrounding elements.

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan used the scientific terms *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt* to suggest mental experiences. *Umwelt* is defined as “biological foundations that lie at the very epicenter of the study of both communication and signification in the human [and nonhuman] animal.” The term is usually translated as a “self-centered” world. *Innenwelt* has to do with interiority, memory, and dreams, areas all closely related to the concept of the image. The image is interpreted by the viewer, and therefore, by association, the image is “in the image of … ” themselves.[[16]](#endnote-17)

*Pneumatopia* enfolds physical, virtual, and imaginary environments within a sequence of happenings. This sculptural constellation includes a pack of portable tripods that stand over five feet tall. Tablet computers are attached to the rolling tripods setup throughout the space and staggered randomly about. Their height and mobility recall the human scale of the mobile IV stands seen in hospitals. The tablets are loaded with the application and allow visitors situated in front of the artwork to access the animated images on their screens. The camera lens of the tablet is like an eye, capturing a code embedded in a pattern on the sculpture. The application translates this information, collapsing space to reveal a technological image.[[17]](#endnote-18) The installation stands like a mirage of translucent-to-opaque planes, fractured between moving and static images, languages, recorded history, and mediums melding into one another. The viewer is situated in both the virtual and the physical space.

*Pneumatopia: Synthetic Cells* is an invented theater that reveals portals into other worlds as a shared experience through a technical apparatus of the image. The use of information technology challenges our understanding of our own relation to reality or truth. These concepts are rooted in a critical conversation about phenomenology, the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view.[[18]](#endnote-19) In both philosophy and art, the crux of the investigation lies in the exploration of how individuals enter into relationships with one another, how they form and modify a mutually understood common ground, and what format of language or communication will be established to facilitate their comprehension.

The philosopher Vilém Flusser describes technical images as abstractions that are derived from texts themselves abstracted from traditional images. Technical, interactive, and dialogic images are inherently different from what may be described as traditional pictures. They rely on programming languages as the apparatus allowing them to exist, which they do in both a virtual and a physical state. These images are loosely related to prehistoric structures and exist without dimension.[[19]](#endnote-20) This non-dimensionality allows for a fluidity between virtual and physical space. The technical image is made up of pixels that can be reproduced and distributed as specific to the use or platform where they exist.

Willy Le Maitre presents two bodies of work in *[I]n the image of …* that investigate the image as a performative space. Both *The Tiger Compound Series* (2017) and *The Clear Lake Archipelago* (2018) are phenomenological dwellings that Le Maitre thinks of as “experience images.” These images emphasize the viewer'’s perception as a mental state within a continuum, and reality as in a constant state of flux and updating and fluxes. In these works, duration is as essential as perspective.

*The Tiger Compound Series* is a group of photographs based on and drawn from an extensive collection of 3D pictures. The photographs were taken in repetition in a snapshot manner. The scene is and illustrated in passing. Le Maitre uses the 3D lenticular printing method to enable viewers to access multiple photos in a single printed object. Lenticular printing gives a sense of depth and allows the viewer to access images from various positions in the exhibition space.[[20]](#endnote-21) This experience magnifies and slows what we see and assimilate. *Autumn tumblr* (2016), for example, when viewed from a directly frontal standpoint, reveals itself as a random composite of images in which the mind’s eye automatically looks for a familiar object. It is difficult to precisely define the composition of the work due to the shifting relationship of the subjects. Looking upon the still frame of the image, we see an autumnal tree with its yellow leaves. While we continue to look, a second image takes shape, in an experience similar to the effect of a double exposure. With a slight movement, the position of each image shifts, revealing another composition that includes an airport conveyer belt and signage for a visually impaired person. The images are activated through the movement of the viewer and the composition shifts as well. Experiencing the technical image is performative, as it is activated through the apparatus of its technology.

*The Clear Lake Archipelago* is an installation using the languages of performance, photography, and virtual reality. Both the physical and the virtual realities offer an entrance into the work’s space. Each articulates the idea of theater as both a verb and a noun; the act, the stage, cinema. The spectator enters a physical installation, a free-standing three-sided frame, and a projected image. Le Maitre leaves options for the spectators’ experience, creating a place where they become participants. Through virtual reality, the participants enter and navigate the landscape of *The Clear Lake Archipelago* as an avatar, whereby a person embodies the shell of a nondescript humanoid. What defines consciousness is an awareness of experience while living or performing it. The user’s projected self delineates the intentionality within the virtual environment, while the virtual character becomes an individual within a specific realm of experience with its own rules and possibilities. The use of information technology, and in particular of virtual reality, challenges our understanding of our relation to reality or truth.

*The Clear Lake Archipelago* illustrates the discovery, analysis, and interpretation of terrain and indigenous entities.[[21]](#endnote-22) Set up as a series of “islands”; the entities inhabiting each island are symbiont avatars and participants. The merger of forms, living and virtual, represents intentionality, the power of the minds to represent or to stand for things, properties, and states of associations. As participants move into the archipelago, the central space of the experience provokes their ability to visualize three-dimensional space. Space is a significant concern in this artwork, not merely as a replication of the physical reality we live and breathe in. Virtual environments have become ambient spaces that we are accustomed to inhabiting through their apparatus. As the avatar moves through space, a path is worn, as if the participant were immersed in a painting, suggesting that everyday gestures inform the digital trace. Viewers leave a track of their steps, informing the perception that their present has a past.

Le Maitre says, “The islands are inhabited by the captives that are stuck in these gestural routines of how a human might behave in the physical realm. The question of what digital space is and how it can be inhabitted is the preoccupation. Digital space is mutable, finite, calculated and offers a logical but very abstract schema that impacts on our physical culture. I think that image is the perfect intersection for dialogical exploration of the physical and the digital.”[[22]](#endnote-23)

There is an exchange of consciousness between the virtual body and the real-time participant; the objective and the subjective collide and the created relationships are interdependent. The intentional merging of the artificial and the actual creates engagement with a technological life form. *The Clear Lake Archipelago* exists in both physical and virtual time and space, which are synced only while the participant occupies both spaces. Participation creates a different experience from the passive viewing of a photograph. Virtual reality is by its nature immersive, for the virtual space does not exist without participation.

The exhibition includes a series of algorithmic paintings by Siebren Versteeg. The term “algorithm” refers to a set of rules to be followed in calculations or other problem-solving operations. Versteeg creates custom algorithms to generate what appear to be painted compositions but are in actuality visualizations of data.

Historically, painting has been considered a superior medium by both historians and the art-viewing public. The painting represents a type of otherworldliness or immanence. There are many reasons to be in awe in front of a magnificent painting, as it captures the essence of life through color, subject, and most important; the subjective perspective of the artist. There is a romantic notion regarding the craft of rendering a likeness of life and the understanding of how to make color out of natural elements. There are hints of the artist as an alchemist or higher being, in some circles even commanding a godlike stature. If we closely examine the craft of painting as a system or a mastery of an art medium, it includes a degree of education and the cultivation of skills to invent or re-create a medium that others can also use, share, and build upon as a means to express themselves. In the case of Versteeg’s work, we can certainly agree with the idea that “the medium is the message,” a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan, meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in any message it would convey.[[23]](#endnote-24) There is a symbiotic relationship in which the medium influences how the language is perceived. The technology, that is the shared experience, reinforces the connection.

Veersteeg’s use of technology challenges established ideas about the aesthetic and the value of the painting. In a purist fashion, rather than using preexisting image-editing platforms, he creates his own unique programs as a means toward a better understanding for the potential and the implications of the medium. Further, he addresses society’s increasingly computed reality and aligns painting not with romantic notions but as a dominant medium that adapts to the contemporary landscape.

Looking back at the history of art, we see a momentum and evolution in keeping languages, or mediums, updated with the times. Time and again we build on our histories and make technological leaps that are folded into accepted mediums. The Northern Renaissance 1420 – 1430’s painter Jan Van Eyck who followed an accepted classical approach to build his pictures, used media made in his own studio. His “recipes” consisted of oil, solvent, measured in specific proportions of fifty percent oil paint and fifty percent solvent, he then altered the formula to the needs of the painting in progress. As he built up the layers of paint, the mixtures underwent chemical reactions that worked to seamlessly fix his images to their canvases. His processes were both adaptations of classical technique and an expression of his own ingenuity. Van Eyck’s method was in keeping with his classical training and a technological advance; like the adaptation to cuneiform, his technique set a universal standard.[[24]](#endnote-25)

Versteeg, like a Renaissance painter, uses a personalized system and a medium of his own singular customized algorithm to make a series of paintings. The recipe, or variables, change in the equation, yet they still produce a painting with either pigment and solvent or code and the choices of the artist. *Double Lean with Shim I, Double Lean with Shim II* (2014) is composed of two tall vertical paintings that, rather than being hung traditionally, lean against the wall. This nontraditional and somewhat casual presentation implies a corporeal presence as well as a confrontation with space and expectation. There is a physicality in the gestural stroke of color sweeping across the canvas. The customized software simulates a lifelike process that creates a variety of textures, such as a soaking-wet brush that forms a fluid mark. Inconsistencies in the markings—for example, striations of fading paint as the emptying brush moves across the canvas—suggest that a human hand is using the paintbrush.

The palette of this work recalls a history of painting, seemingly to reference both Willem de Kooning’s *Woman and Landscape* (1954–55) and the pastel colors, in combination with the gestures, of the late Baroque, as in the highly ornamental curves of Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s *Swing* (1767). Yet Versteeg’s creative impulse is not linked specifically to the visual thinking of painting, nor to creating an image as a performance. Nor is it tied to any particular bodily presence, perception, or material condition. These paintings may be reproduced like photographs and Versteeg’s algorithm can be used for other purposes. In this, there is an expansion of consciousness. It is necessary to avoid viewing these works through the lens of our traditional approaches to painting, but more in view of the abstract theoretical. Versteeg focuses simultaneously on the production of visual information and the expansion of language toward abstraction as a creative undertaking.

*[I]n the image of …* is inspired by the trajectory of my curatorial practice. My method of curation exposes the importance of relational aesthetics as a concept that grows and adapts to various missions and spaces. There is a strong relational aspect to this exhibition in continuity with my first curatorial projects at Moving Image Gallery, New York, in 2000. MIG was one of the first galleries to show contemporary artists using electronic and computer-based mediums. In a pair of exhibitions entitled *Ideogram,* 2000, artists explored the use of programming code as a vocabulary capable of creating a visual environment. *Ideogram Part 2* explored the use of the Web as a collaborative landscape, creating references to public art, territorial marking, and styles redefining the purposes of “public.” *[I]n the Image of …* adds to this conversation and shows an evolution of how language and writing systems play a role in the history of visual communication and culture.

To further instill language in the structure of *[I]n the image of …* , the placement of the works within the space and in relation to one another refers to the use of syntax in writing systems. The notion of the “in between” supports the idea that the process falls within a continuum. Each artwork in the exhibition is recognized as a happening, as a culmination of actions that are situated together to create a narrative. This stylistic approach is deeply rooted in my production values. The physical composition of an exhibition is relational and may be described as a process of experience that gains in momentum, and that builds upon information positioned on all sides of the happening. This style of producing comes under the umbrella of “meta-curating.” This method of curatorial practice sets the notion of presentation against the idea of something in action. It allows for the evolution of an idea rather than a statement. The curatorial premise of the exhibition is the belief that the evolution of writing systems into programming languages uncovers new territory for a shared experience. This comes, not through the content of the communication, but rather through the technology itself.

*[I]n the image of …* brings my curatorial exploration full circle. In 2000 I stated that with the development of programming language and the Internet, it stood to reason that art would evolve. Net art encompasses processes of artmaking using a computer in some form or another, whether to download imagery that is then exhibited online or to build programs that create the artwork. The programming languages that are used to make the software in communication-technology-based art raise the question, “When does the tool become the art?” Several practices related to these propositions are worthy of investigation. The use of computer-based mediums has become commonplace in both contemporary art practice and the larger systems of global communication, including distribution, interaction, replication, and positioning. Computer files support multiple active modes of production and artmaking.

The primary subject of the *Ideogram* exhibitions was the evolution of language on both a literal and a visual level. The artists explored the use of programming code as a vocabulary capable of creating a visual environment. The work referenced the tradition of symbolism while examining the ramifications of a contemporary translation. The programmers translated modern ideas through historical references using binary code. The artist’s use of a programming language, in this case JAVA, translated statistical graphics into subtlety nuanced images and works that transformed animated objects and sounds into synchronized patterns. The user could explore this world by moving through a series of visual planes, a unique environment because it resides online and allows for multiple users to have a common shared experience.

In the virtual space of the Internet, there is a relationship between memory and real-time engagement. “Communication is no longer dictated by traditional paradigms of leaving and arriving in space, but rather by the speed of information exchange in real time.” David Crawford.[[25]](#endnote-26) This trend altered what it means to be “here” and “now” in terms of real-time processing and real-time operating systems that process data as it is received.

Working through references to public art, territorial marking, and the redefinition of use for public and commercial space, the second *Ideogram* exhibition explored the use of the Web as a collaborative environment. Many artists were trying to occupy and articulate a middle ground between art and interactive entertainment, between communication and creativity, and between independent and collaborative expression. In the early stages of using the Web as an artistic platform, some artists were exploring the hybrid phenomena of network drawing spaces, game-like search engines, written pictures, and informative art. Others were building an endless archive of digital debris, exploring the fine line between these first cousins—art and debris—as the use of the found object continually mutates through the nuances of digital interfaces.[[26]](#endnote-27) These examples of works that reside on the computer depend on executable files, such as an Internet-based application or other program, which are required to complete the work. One could say that the code *is* the artwork.

All of the works in this exhibition operate under an open-source aesthetic, and each work builds on a method already in use. This system is the medium. In keeping with an open and evolving language, open-source coding allows users to improve on a code or use it as a building block. This aligns with the idea of a working tool that may be customized to a particular use—the very essence of evolution and expression. The term “open source” originated in the context of software development to designate a specific approach to creating computer programs. By emphasizing the aspect of sharing resources, everything is built upon the work that went before.

*[I]n the image of …* builds on the definition of the shared experience and the development of the technological image. The term “abstraction” derives from two Latin terms; “*ab*,” meaning “away from,” and “*trahere*,” meaning “to draw.” Abstraction is the process of taking away or removing characteristics from something to reduce it to a set of essential features. Object oriented programming language meanwhile is a rational interpretation of images and an abstraction derived from texts, which themselves are abstracted from traditional images.[[27]](#endnote-28)Technical images are inherently different from what may be described as traditional pictures and rely on programming languages as the apparatus allowing them to exist in both a virtual and physical state.

Rees’s sculptural installation *Pneumatopia: Synthetic Cells* presents a shared experience through the apparatus of the technological image. The image is revealed through the apparatus of augmented reality. Le Maitre’s *Tiger Compound Series* suggests that the technical image is performative, as it is activated through the apparatus of its technology and the apparatus of the lenticular print. The performative quality is instigated by the viewer’s position in the exhibition space. Le Maitre’s *The Clear Lake Archipelago* installation further explores the performative aspect of the technical image through the languages of performance, photography, and virtual reality. Participation with VR expands upon the notion of the technical image into the concept of the participant within an experience. Finally, Versteeg’s algorithmic paintings are data representations that may be reproduced in the same vein as the technological image.

The art in *[I]n the image of …* uses technology to expand upon traditional genres, using the abstraction of language and the root of the shared experience as its foundation. The performative quality of these works suggests that the shared experience develops through the use of technology rather than from what the technology reveals, and that the shared experience lies in engagement with the apparatus, not in the image/object itself. The creation of a shared experience is dependent on the technology defined as language and its attendant writing system. The success of this approach depends on an individual perception of any shared experience and is further reliant on our subjective interpretation. Just as we understand language as a complex sequence whose meaning is defined by syntax, *[I]n the image of …* is an abstraction of language in the continuum of communication in space and time.

Michele Nicole Thursz, 2019

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