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On digital hallucination and other myths

Three recent exhibitions in Copenhagen unpack contemporary art's take on the ethical, social and political dimensions of AI.

by Diana Baldon | Published on : Oct 25, 2024



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'Hallucination' is well underway in today's world of **technology**. The word denoting cognitive processes in psychology, psychedelics and even strong spiritual experiences has been appropriated by computer scientists to explain how **AI** can process data wrongly, to the detriment of human knowledge that believes it. In an opinion piece in *The Guardian* in May 2023, author and activist Naomi Klein sums it up: "AI's boosters [...] are in the process of birthing [...] an evolutionary leap for our species: [...] our words, our images, our songs, our entire digital lives [...] are currently being seized: [...] these] hallucinations [...] about all the wonderful things that AI will do for humanity [...] disguise mass theft as a gift."



Scraper, 1-channel video, sound, 2023, Most Dismal Swamp; installation view from the exhibition *Poetics of Encryption*, Kunsthal Charlottenborg, 2024

Image: David Stjernholm; Courtesy of Most Dismal Swamp and Harlan Levey Projects

As for many of today's **exhibitions** across the Global North that thematise the developments of the techno-sphere (deploying a term coined in the mid-2010s by American geologist Peter K. Haff), three arts institutions in **Copenhagen** delve into

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contemporary art's fascination with the ethical, social and political impact of AI and how it intersects with issues of power, colonialism and cultural hegemony. Diverse in scale, all three exhibitions promote a fusion of videos, sculptures and music where visual imagery and digital technologies hybridise.

// Wang & Söderström's imagery highlights "the power over what and how we experience, via our technology" but their techno-myths also reclaim conventional norms and traditions.



Installation view of *the underground* in the exhibition *Techno Mythologies*, Wang & Söderström, Christiansborg Palace, 2024

Image: David Stjernholm; Courtesy of Therese Lærke, Wang & Söderström and Christiansborg Slot

Both the solo show *Techno Mythologies* by Swedish-born artists and designers Wang & Söderström, conceived for the Brewery of the Royal Court and managed by Christiansborg Palace and the group show *Poetics of Encryption* at Kunsthall Charlottenborg attempt to supersede a predictable theoretical reading of this field. They shift away from academic speculations about capitalist systems using data and generative AI to inhabit, instead, darker galaxies. They stage CGI-fabricated hallucinations that seduce visitors to imagine fictive underworlds, the realm of digital cultures where disorientation and loss prevail.



Installation view of *the sky* in the exhibition *Techno Mythologies*, Wang & Söderström, Christiansborg Palace, 2024

Image: David Stjernholm; Courtesy of Therese Lærke, Wang & Söderström and Christiansborg Slot

By means of a sensory experience, *Techno Mythologies* is an immersive journey. Visual effects reflected on the artworks' shimmering surfaces—prismatic filters, neon lights and video projections imbued with metallic hues—slalom through numerous gigantic stone sculptures from the 1500s to the 1700s that symbolise spiritual and monarchic powers. Engaging with their "supernatural" aura, the duo borrows figures of the bird Phoenix, swarming colonies of ants and butterflies and a snake shedding its skin from Greek and Norse mythologies. They symbolise satellite infrastructures (*the sky*), data flows in Internet cables (*the earth*) and the mining of rare materials (*the underground*). They ask: what are such structures if not signs of vertical, unregulated power by big tech companies existing on the premise that they help us travel, learn and interact with one another?

Wang & Söderström's imagery highlights "the power over what and how we experience, via our technology," as the exhibition text notes, but their techno-myths also reclaim

conventional norms and traditions. Focusing on the artistic values of materiality, skill and craft—concepts derived from the etymology of the Greek word 'techne'—the physicality of their **3D printed** objects contends with their digital alter egos described above.



VideoSculpture XXV (Archons), 2022, Emmanuel Van der Auwera, installation view from the exhibition *Poetics of Encryption*, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, 2024
Image: David Stjernholm; Courtesy of Emmanuel Van der Auwera and Harlan Levey Projects

Originally presented at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in **Berlin**, the group exhibition *Poetics of Encryption* is a tour-de-force of durational and sometimes lengthy artworks by 38 international artists and collectives – in which we encounter a familiar aesthetic and semantic techno-vernacular. Masterfully displayed in blacked-out spaces fashioned as caves, crypts and graves (the sections are titled *Black Site*, *Black Hole*, *Black Box*) that seek to amplify the effect of alienation, the exhibition thematises how ciphers and encryption are agents of disguise. Instrumental to this topic are the AI-powered videos *Scraper* (2023) by the collaborative art platform *Most Dismal Swamp* and Emmanuel Van der Auwera's installation *VideoSculpture XXV (Archons)* (2022). The first focuses on data that goes through Byzantine transformations: though encrypted, in the end, it always resurfaces through memes and **social media** feeds. Van der Auwera's **installation** consists of eight LCD screens that explore the theme of digital immortality, staging the virtual interaction between a mother and the avatar of her deceased child. Just two years ago when the artist created this work, the prospect of **machine-learning** models training on data accumulated over a lifetime by a deceased person was utopian fiction; very recently, however, people have started seeking help from AI-generated avatars to process their grief after a family member has passed away.



View from a Harbour in Paris, oil on painting, 1892, Bertha Wegmann
Image: Courtesy of SMK - National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen

Against All Odds: Historical Women and New Algorithms is a third group exhibition, presented at Statens Museum for Kunst (SMK) - National Gallery of Denmark. The exhibition brings together **paintings** by 24 Nordic **women artists** realised between 1870 and 1910, alongside an installation by **contemporary artist** Itzel Yard aka Ix Shells, to address their place in **art history**. Despite achieving discreet success by migrating to other European capitals, their practices remain lesser known, partly due to widespread gender discrimination in the art field throughout history. According to Emilie Boe Bierlich, project researcher and **curator** of the exhibition, "Instead of trying to reinscribe them into the history that erased them, [...] we can imagine completely different ways of writing history." Therefore, to her, "algorithmic cultures" offer a solution since "generative AI affects our present and understanding of the past".



Interlinked, audiovisual, 2024, from the group exhibition *Against All Odds - Historical Women and New Algorithms*, SMK - National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen, Itzel Yard aka Ix Shells
Image: Courtesy of Itzel Yard aka Ix Shells and SMK - National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen

The **audiovisual** installation *Interlinked* (2024) by Ix Shells yearns for spectacle and quietly disturbs the elegant, tranquil refuge that the show offers. Styled as a dark microcosm of a fictitious universe, it deploys AI-controlled real-time sensors and **projection-mapping** graphics that constantly repurpose data taken from visitors' movements, as well as from stories, colours and places that pertain to Nordic artists' lives. Such imagery is caged within mirrored black surfaces, forcing real and digital realms, and past and present to interact with one another. Much of the same data flows into a second installation by the artist, *Backend* (2024), which presents the deconstruction of the artists' own methods as well as those adopted by the generative AI processes in *Interlinked*. This approach intends to uncover how humans feed content into algorithmic technologies and how, through such an onerous endeavour, AI may become today's tool to enable visitors to see these artists and their artworks in a new way. However, is it possible to undermine the controversial aspects of the use of AI and its continuing patterns of discrimination if its programming keeps being trained by humans?



Panorama Cat, taxidermy cat, polyurethane foam, 2022, Eva & Franco Mattes, installation view from the exhibition *Poetics of Encryption*, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, 2024
Image: David Stjernholm; Courtesy of Eva & Franco Mattes, APALAZZOGALLERY, 2024

At first glance, all three exhibitions seem to share an engagement with the cultural shift in art driven by computer-generated software. But with a deeper reading, they unravel another point: under the pressure of multidisciplinary approaches which are increasingly combining artistic forms and mathematical sciences, the traditional concept of visual representation is being altered by a new "species of images", as argued by scholar and theorist W.J.T. Mitchell in his book *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics*. Such transformation is embodied by Eva & Franco Mattes' *Panorama Cat* (2022): the taxidermied sculpture of a red cat with eight legs is resuscitated from the 'hallucination' of a panoramic photo from a smartphone; a digital image that went viral through the meme subgenre *LOLcat*. The act of giving material life to the social-media version of the image of a furry, digitally-warped and physically-enhanced animal becomes a mythical chimaera, that of any offspring born in a new era of distorted realism and visual culture. By witnessing a cultural shift for which the adoption of a new computer-generated species of imagery transforms the very essence of visual representation, we must rethink and embrace an era of distorted realism, which becomes one of the predominant lenses through which we view art.

Disclaimer: Some sections of this text were artificially optimised by the AI chatbot ChatGPT as an iterative and stylistic response to the themes under discussion.