

## ENTANGLED REALITIES

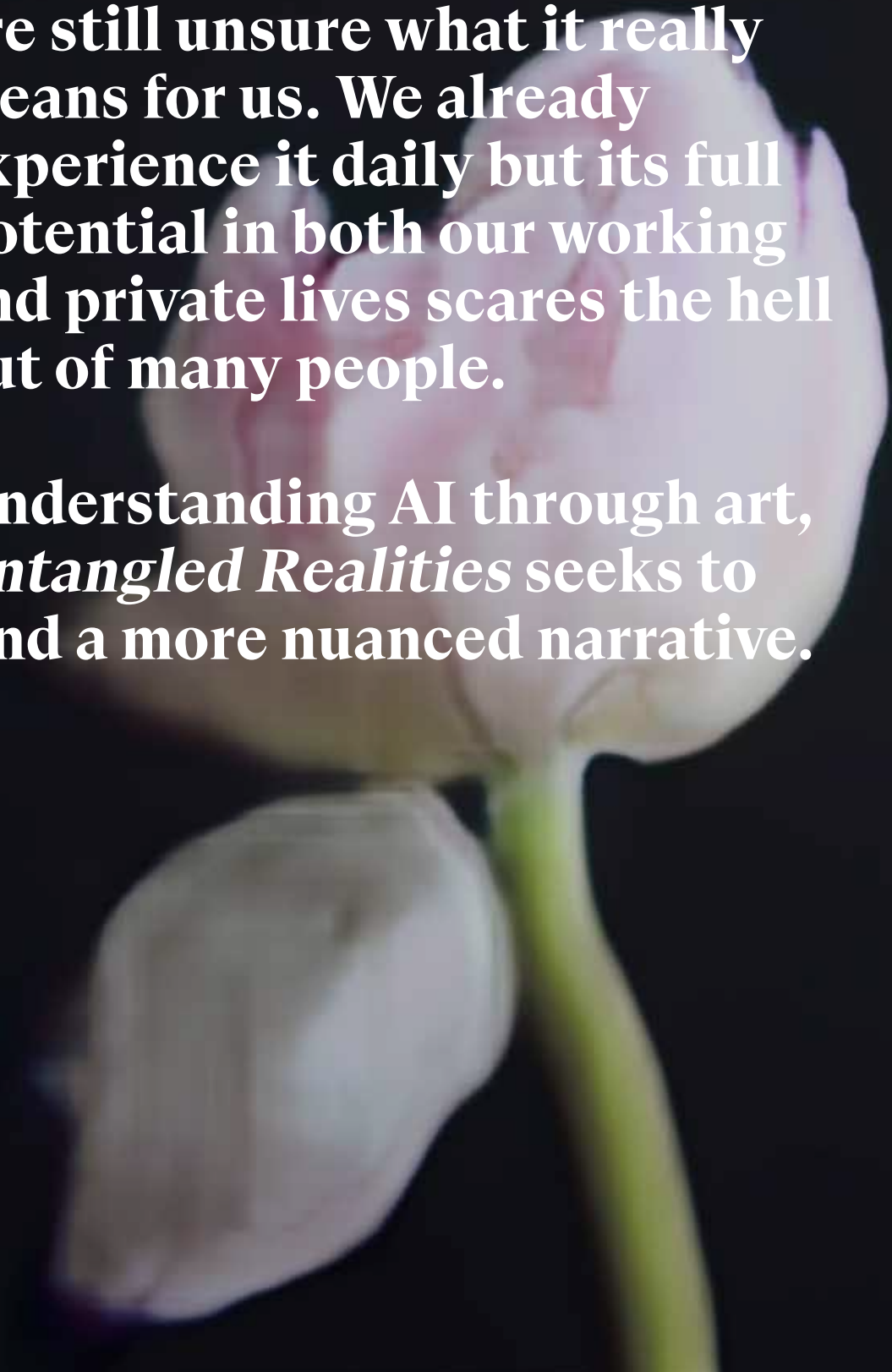
by Anna Ridler



Herrdon/Dryhurst: Deep Belief, 2018  
VideoPhoto  
Proto Studio / Daniel Costa Neves

Exhibitions about artificial intelligence are making their presence felt in museums across the world. We know the term but are still unsure what it really means for us. We already experience it daily but its full potential in both our working and private lives scares the hell out of many people.

Understanding AI through art, *Entangled Realities* seeks to find a more nuanced narrative.



Anna Ridler with David Pfau, Bloemenveiling, 2019  
Detail of work sold at auction

# Making sense of it all



Sebastian Schmieg, *Decisive Mirror*, 2019  
Installation view, photo: Franz Warmhof

*Entangled Realities*, a group show currently on at HeK Basel, looks at the impact of artificial intelligence (AI). Increasingly our world is being created by software we hardly understand – financial markets where bots endlessly trade with other bots, social media algorithms that control what narrative we see, even AI fakes that make us doubt our own ears and eyes – so that it becomes harder and harder to sort out where the human influence is. Works in the show question this entanglement, and by exploring it seek to disentangle notions around what it might be to be both machine and human.

AI is commonly thought of as the ability of a machine to perform tasks that require ‘intelligent human behaviour’: translating words, driving cars, recognising faces. And while systems can do these things, it is misleading to think that they understand the world in the same way we do. When shown a picture of a cat, they do not see a cat, but rather patterns and data. Machine learning in this way can show us the potential ‘field of vision’ of something non-human. Such possibilities are explored by James Bridle in *Untitled (Activation 001-005)* and *Untitled (Autonomous Trap*

*001)*, series of photographs both from 2017, that show the process of a self-driving car learning to see, and how it pictures the world in a series of blots and blobs. There is a tension though. In Bridle’s opening night lecture he told the audience that while we are learning more and more about intelligent non-human systems that exist in the natural world (trees that can communicate to each other through entire forests for example), we are spending more and more time, effort and resources in trying to reproduce our own version of intelligence in a digital form, ignoring the weirdness and otherness that already exists. Some of this is captured in Jenna Sutela’s *nimiia cétii* (2018), a video piece that is inspired by experiments in interspecies communication and attempts to connect with a world

beyond our consciousness. It uses the interactions between a neural network, audio recordings of a French psychic’s version of a Martian language and the movements of bacteria, to create a new form of communication that could be a glimpse of how something other than human might experience the world.

But machine learning can also show humanness. Training sets, the information given to machine learning algorithms that it then uses to produce an output, are reflections of their context. They are always compiled by human

beings and are the products of people, and because of this, inevitably come to enshrine certain cultural or social attitudes. Trevor Paglen’s *Behold these Glorious Times!* (2017) shows the humanity that goes into producing datasets – how they need to include every single type of action and object in order to understand the world. Watching these small fragments of human lives, as a film, is moving and profound, a vast range of narratives, peoples, and scenes played out within minutes. As a method, exploring training sets through art is a way of reflecting back on ourselves and the world that we have created.

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Many of the works in the exhibition are in-between this spectrum of otherness and humanity, what happens when the human and machine intertwine – the entangled realities that give the

exhibition its name. It is something that is explored in my piece *Bloemenveiling* (2019), made with David Pfau. It examines this interaction across a distributed app to auction AI generated tulips on the blockchain (a public ledger where cryptocurrency transactions are recorded and confirmed anonymously, and whose information once entered cannot be altered). Echoing the auctions that sprung up throughout taverns in 17th-century Holland at the height of tulip mania, the piece interrogates the way technology drives human desire and economic dynamics by creating artificial scarcity. Short moving

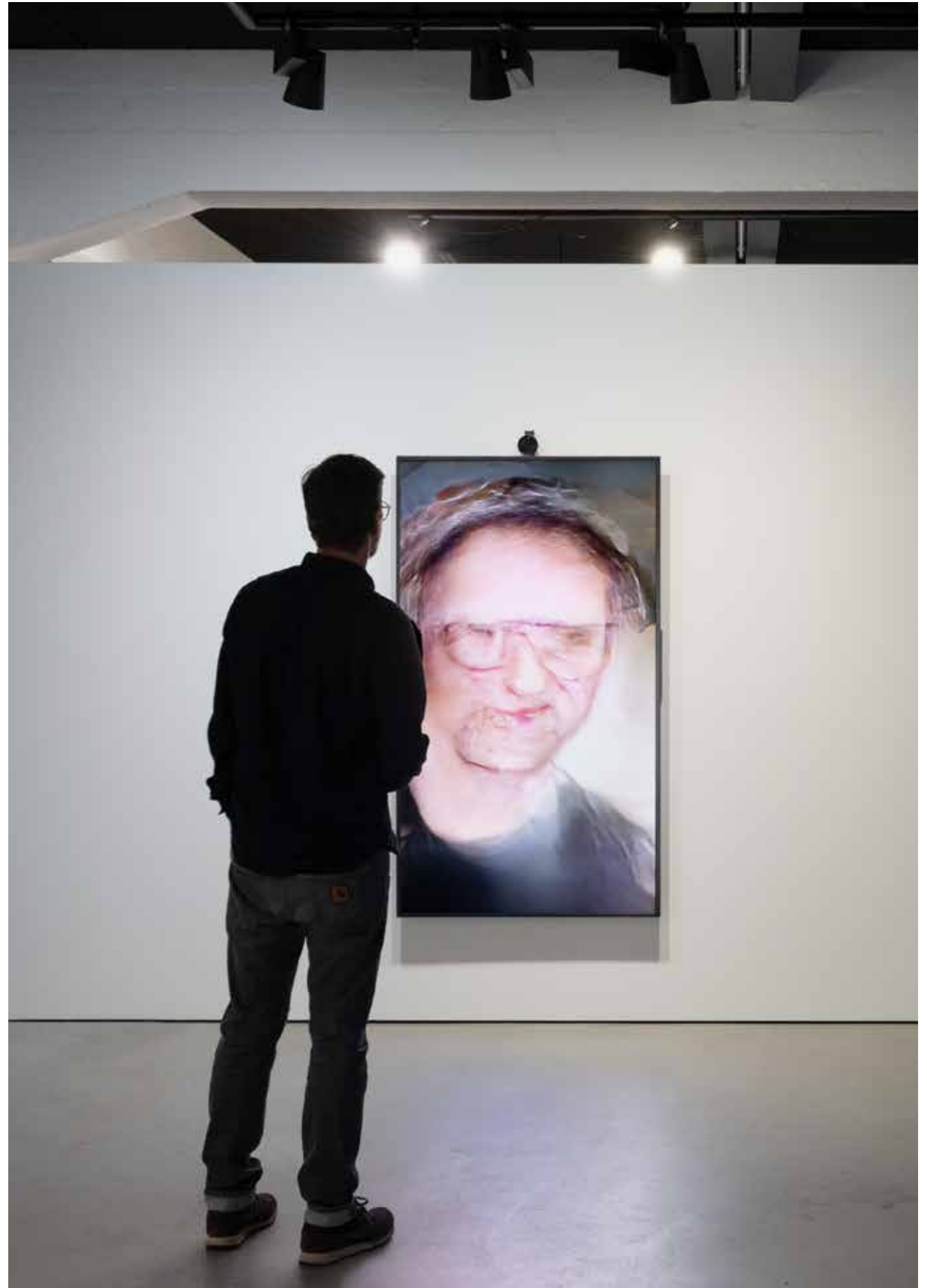


Zach Blas & Jemima Wynman, *im here to learn so :))))))*, 2017  
Installation view, photo: Franz Wamhof

images that almost look like real tulips but are created by AI are sold at auction using smart contracts on the Ethereum network, a global, open-source platform for decentralised applications. Each time a tulip is sold, thousands of computers around the world all work to verify the transaction, checking each other's work against each other. Even if the website for the auction shuts down, a permanent record will still exist of who owns which tulip. A network of bots participates in the auction alongside humans, driving demand in much the same way as automated trading algorithms drive modern financial markets. After a week, the tulip is blighted, and its owner can no longer view the moving image piece. In this way, the decay and impermanence of the natural world is reintroduced into the digital world. While AI that created the moving image pieces has the potential to generate infinite flowers, the enormous distributed network behind Ethereum is used, at great environmental cost, to introduce scarcity to an otherwise limitless resource.

The human-machine interaction is also part of Mario Klingemann's *Uncanny Mirror* (2018), where visitors stand in front of a screen to have their image transformed and transmuted by AI into something that is recognisably them but also not them. Uncanny is often a word that is used to describe images or texts that have been produced by machine learning: what has been made has a disquieting strangeness or mysteriousness that makes it not quite true. This sense of the word of something being uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar overtakes the older meaning, which had more connotations of being mischievous, malicious or not to be trusted. This shift, from being scared to uncertainty, is perhaps the way that a visitor will view AI after experiencing the works on view, moving away from the hysteria that machines will take over the world to a more nuanced understanding of AI's ambivalent strangeness.

Entangled Realities – Living with Artificial Intelligence,  
HeK (House of Electronic Arts) Basel, until 11 August,  
[hek.ch](http://hek.ch)



Mario Klingemann, *Uncanny Mirror*, 2018, installation view  
Photo: Franz Wamhof