Stormy Weather. On Human-Made Clouds in Contemporary Art

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"Wow, I see a plane in the sky. I haven't seen a plane in weeks!" – These words uttered in a telephone conversation during the preparations for the exhibition are very likely an expression of astonishment that has no equal in the past decades. For weeks the sky was free of cloud-like condensation trails and marked by the aggressive presence of, when not dependency on, other clouds: In the recent times of the COVID pandemic some human-made clouds had suddenly vanished, while we set up our new homes in others. The contrails – or chemtrails in keeping with popular conspiracy theories – no longer structured the view to the sky after the cessation of air traffic. Instead, our laptop asked us several times per day if we want to "connect audio to computer"; our everyday communication had migrated into the video cloud and cloud-based streaming portals, and gaming distribution platforms took care of entertainment.[1]

Sweet pastel-coloured cloud motifs on pale pinks, like those on the cover of this catalogue, which upon closer inspection are all identical, form a romantic firmament. What we see here is not a heavenly Rococo sky but the work of artist Christiane Peschek, whose artificial-natural cloud series *Velvet Fields* (since 2017) billows in the atmosphere of the exhibition project *Stormy Weather*. But Peschek's clouds do not document natural phenomena; they were created with digital tools: *Stormy Weather* as well as the mentioned work deal with human-made clouds, first and foremost, with the reality and the metaphor of the technological cloud. The relationship between humans, technology, and cloud is multifaceted. In the context of a cloud network, the cloud is more than just a diagrammatic symbol. When we speak about the cloud, metaphor and hard reality overlap. *Stormy Weather* navigates between these two poles: between the cloud as a symbol for technological networks, on the

1 Parallel, the fragility of the cloud infrastructure became all the more evident in this time. When millions of people are on the same streaming feed, the supply has to be thinned out – for example, Facebook, YouTube, Google, and Netflix reduced their video quality standards to lighten the burden on the Internet. Cf. BBC News, "Coronavirus: Facebook cuts video quality to ease net strain," March 23, 2020, http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52003035 (last retrieved August 1, 2020).

2 Paul Baran, *On Distributed Communication Networks (P-2626)*, The Rand Corporation, September 1962, www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2005/P2626.pdf (last retrieved August 1, 2020).

one hand, whose apparently ephemeral nature often occludes its very real consequences, and human interventions with technology in our weather and climate. The main aspects of the project are anchored to three nexus: the cloud as a challenge and mechanism in the consolidation of sovereign power (Marc Lee, Total Refusal, Christoph Wachter & Mathias Jud), the interplay between cloud, weather, and climate (Fragmentin, Yein Lee), and the affects and desires attached to human-made clouds (Christiane Peschek, Susanna Flock & Leonhard Müllner, Stefan Karrer, Till Langschied).

A Short History of the Cloud Symbol

"The cloud does not exist. It's just somebody else's computer." – This meme proliferating in technology circles aims to expose the material infrastructure behind the image of the cloud, but also addresses, above all, the loss of control over outsourced data, which is stored with "someone else" and likely viewed, analysed, and forwarded. Although the notion of a cloud is discredited here as misleading, revealing the dangers of blind trust in the infrastructure, it is worth taking this nature-based and technological metaphor seriously. The technological cloud – the place where our data is saved with a simple push of a button, but also where a large portion of the computing power has been transferred to – was represented quite early in the history of technology (in the sense of a network diagram) as a cloud-like formation.

In his 1962 paper *On Distributed Communication Systems* Paul Baran describes, in the context of the Cold War, the differences between centralised, decentralised, and distributed networks.[2] While the first two could be easily disabled in the case of an armed attack, the advantage of a distributed

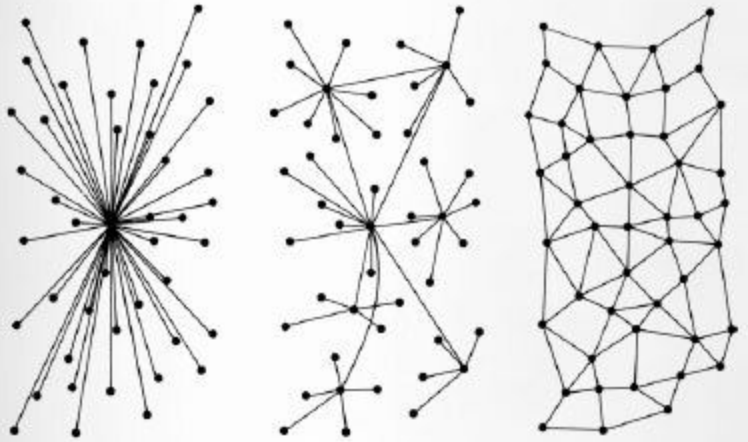

fig. 1

Marc Lee

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Political Campaigns – Battle of Opinion on Social Media (since 2016), conceived by Swiss media artist and software developer Marc Lee, is an Internet news channel with reports that are never more than three minutes old. With no editorial hand behind the content selection and processing, Lee's work is operated by a bot, a computer program. The bot automatically chooses between diverse Internet sources and broadcasts them via the freely accessible URL http://marclee.io/tvbot/election.php. The result is a rapid succession of Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube posts. It develops an election forecast of which candidate currently has more nominations. While Lee makes reference to traditional news channels such as CNN, the contents of his TV bot remains without context: As soon as the title of one feature is read, it is already replaced by the next one. The ever shorter cycles of contemporary news production and the related increasing randomness of information reports become obvious. Lee's *Political Campaigns – Battle of Opinion on Social Media* exaggerates the credo of the "liveness" of news and social media and makes the inherent challenges of the accelerated, overheated pace of news streams in the web explicit: The US American presidential election of 2016 drew public awareness to the use of Twitter bots as a political instrument. But the complex mix of personal and automated social media entries, agency reports, editorial texts, and censorship interventions by leading social media platforms will certainly play a central role once again in the 2020 campaign.

Marc Lee, *Political Campaigns – Battle of Opinion on Social Media* since depuis 2016