

Ancient belief has it that before swans pass away, they belt out a final graceful chant. But do they sing their most beautiful song out of sorrow for what has been, or solace for what has yet to come?

Seemingly triggered by every movement, a distinct sound swells, swirls into the space. Is it the fluttering of birds or shuttering of cameras?

Scanners adorn the walls. They turn what they see into bits, strips of colour, as their way to quantify the real world. What are these little black boxes looking at? Or perhaps rather, who?

Blurring the boundary between this fiction and reality, the aluminum grid finds an extension as the frame of a large-scale photo-multigraph.

This type of photography allowed for a person to be seen from all angles at the same time. However, the woman's gaze in this image changes. Uncertain, a tear escapes; a serious reflection follows; lastly, a fierce look in the lens of the scanner behind her.

Where is the artist in this setting? Is he in control? By any means, it is not a photographer portraying this female model, but a machine. It captures her, forever. In the final moments of her heyday, she is eternalized. Her physical presence, her weary body is made redundant by her digitized, idealized rendition. Her digital double is destined for an everlasting life beyond her own.

The floral still life is depicted at a similar moment in time: right before the flowers start to wilt. In line with the painterly tradition of haunting vanitas, this funeral floral arrangement acts as a reminder that all luscious luxuries of this world are trifling and transitory, that all passing life is but a preparation for a divine afterlife. Furthermore, in this image the vase is actually scanned, as was the woman's body - both concrete holders of worldly possessions. Should these specific containers then be given up in exchange for a virtual, eternal bliss?

The grey face, an editable layer, also talks of transcendence. By improving the real to get the ideal, the disturbing decay is deceived. There is no fading in this fabricating. What possibilities does this entail? What kind of future, of presence, prevails: physical or virtual?

Is it really Eden or Inferno? Miracle or misfortune? Could it be the swan song for us all?

'Swan Song' is a site-specific, total installation and the first installment of Alexey Shlyk and Ben Van den Berghe's ongoing project 'Virtual Escape'. This research embraces the ambiguity of the human relationship with technology and focuses on the impact and implications of fast-developing image technologies (such as computer-generated images, visual effects software and artificial intelligence). These cutting-edge tools not only raise questions on the modalities of image making, but also on the (dis)trusted status of the image as a "quote from appearance". Furthermore they affect the relationship between the real and virtual realm: which one are we escaping to? And from?

Since 2016, **Alexey Shlyk** (b. 1986, BLR) and **Ben Van den Berghe** (b. 1985, B) developed a collaborative artistic practice that examines the transformative ability of photography as optical architecture. Their projects mostly have taken on the form of large-scale, site-specific installations. Their works have been presented at, amongst others, El Quinto Piso, Mexico City (2018), Art Brussels (2018), Untitled Miami (2018), CCHA, Hasselt (2019) and Texture, Kortrijk (2021).

Text by Eline Verstegen

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A MAN STERNLY CLEARING HIS THROAT (2020–2021), OSCAR HUGAL

Running alongside their temporary projects, GALLERY GALLERY invites an artist to develop a work which will be on show for an entire year. The first to kick off this series is Oscar Hugal. His single-channel sound piece distributes the noise of a man sternly clearing his throat once every minute throughout the exhibition space. The work draws attention to itself, its surroundings and the visitors' presence.