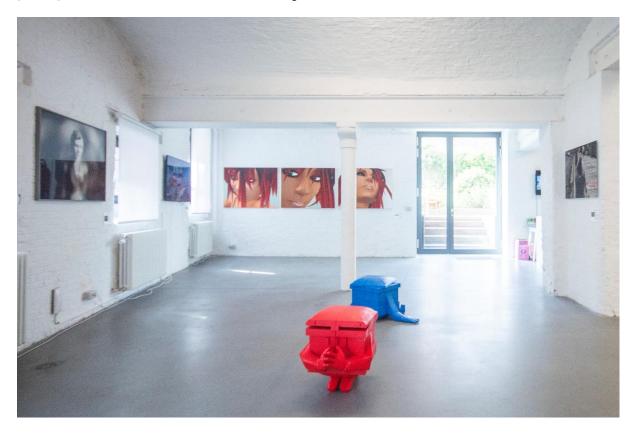Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds
Curated by Bob Bicknell-Knight
Chiho Aoshima, Cory Arcangel and Paper Rad, Myfanwy Ashmore, Bob Bicknell-Knight, Brody Condon, Jodi, Walter Langelaar, Eva and Franco Mattes, Eddo Stern, Petra Szemàn, Ubermorgen, Angela Washko and Laurie Simmons
25th April - 5th May 2024, Thursday to Sunday, 1:30 – 6 pm or by appointment
[Senne], rue de la Senne 19, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

I'm about a third of the way through my life, if average life expectancies are to be trusted. I've been playing video games for the majority of this time, engaging with this vast and varied medium for as long as I can remember. I have embodied different roles and engaged in countless diverse experiences and scenarios, from controlling two brothers in a magical land on a quest to find medicine for their dying father to being the embodiment of a digital virus sent into the innards of an unruly AI. The games I've played, and the emotions that they have stirred inside of me, have shaped the person I am today, interacting and engaging with the world around me.

It's for this reason that I was interested in working with [Senne] for a second time, for the exhibition Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds. The show brings together a number of artists who, through their work, explore emotional and empathetic moments within and through digital spaces. The exhibition moves through different ways artists create empathy through the lens of digital portraiture, beginning with manufacturing feelings for artefacts, which is exemplified by Laurie Simmons' *Untitled (Woman's Head)* (1976), a photograph that's part of Simmons' seminal work anthropomorphising dolls by utilising an extremely shallow depth of field, bringing these figures to the foreground. My own sculptures in the exhibition correspond to this sub-theme, *Assembly (Relief)* (2023) and *Time Out (Bitter)* (2023), child-sized sculptures of video game loot boxes posed in various empathetic positions, haphazardly placed around the gallery.

An earlier series of works in Eva and Franco Mattes' oeuvre, *Portraits* (2006 – 2007), introduces us to another sub-theme in the show; in-game photography techniques, and how artists have been using them for decades, documenting people and places within video games. The series of prints on canvas depict members of the *Second Life* (2003) community that the artists surrounded themselves with for a year, illustrating the different avatars that players chose to represent themselves within the game space.

The final area of the exhibition investigates how artists have been appropriating video games through modifications and machinima, films produced within or using video games. This section of the show begins with Cory Arcangel and Paper Rad's *Super Mario Movie* (2005), a film made on a modified Super Mario Brothers Nintendo cartridge that sees Mario's life and the world around him slowly degrade and fall apart within the digital space, leading to a hallucinogenic journey through the plumber's mind. Through this sub-theme, we are then introduced to works by Brody Condon, JODI, Walter Langelaar, Petra Szemán and Angela Washko, among others.

I keep returning to the medium of video games, both in my curatorial and artistic work, but also as a source of entertainment in my spare time. I'm interested in the interactive nature of video games, enabling me to be an active participant, rather than a passive observer, in the stories I choose to immerse myself within. I enjoy having some level of control over my own destiny within these spaces, altering and being a part of the overarching narrative, whilst having the ability to role play as someone else entirely, with a different personality and new ways of seeing.

The nature of being an active participant, controlling a virtual avatar, has enabled me to see hundreds of unknown worlds through someone else's eyes, be it an orc, super soldier, or amoeba, role playing countless unlived lives. Through stepping into another's virtual shoes and engaging in an experience from an altered point of view, I am, in turn, connected to those who have created the experiences that I'm engaging in. These experiences have been designed by teams varying in scale, from a sole developer making every single decision to thousands of individuals tasked with creating increasingly elaborate worlds. Each one has left their unique fingerprints on the finished product, the finished experience, enabling me to grow and evolve my own way of thinking.

A game I recently played that enabled me to see through another's eyes is *Venba* (2023), a narrative cooking game where you play as the titular character, Venba, an Indian immigrant and mother, who immigrates to Canada with her family in the 1980s. Through engaging with the short experience I was, ever so briefly, able to see the world through Venba's eyes, cooking Tamil recipes whilst simultaneously seeing and experiencing a small slice of how it feels to travel to a new country, leaving your extended family and friends behind. This experience, alongside many others that I have had with video games in the past, not only manufactured empathy that I felt for the characters, but for the creators of the game, as well as making me reflect on my own life and those within it. Although similar narratives appear in film and television, the interactivity in video games is key, placing you in a position to make decisions and move forwards at your own pace.

Many of the works in the exhibition make you feel something for the virtual characters that you engage with when playing video games, in turn forcing you to reflect on your own existence outside of the game space. One such example is Alan Butler's *Down and Out in Los Santos* (2015 – present), an ongoing series of photographs of unhoused citizens within the world of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), itself a replica of Los Angeles. The photos range from blurry to hyperreal, and could be misconstrued for real world people if you weren't looking hard enough. The figures are deemed unimportant non player characters (NPCs) within the game world, characters that are controlled by the computer who live looping lives, echoing how governments and corporations treat society's most vulnerable. Another work of mine in the exhibition, the film *Non-Player Character* (2022), also references these ideas of looping lives. The work sees a number of popular NPC enemies from different video games falling into a white space, breaking apart and becoming a homogenous whole, lamenting their own on-rails existence and, in turn, prompting the audience to reflect on how they live their lives.

When speaking about empathy and video games, another game that comes to mind where the emotional process is used both directly and indirectly, is *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), an action-adventure game set in a zombie apocalypse. Within the first part of the game you play as Ellie, a young woman seeking revenge for the killing of Joel, her adoptive father. Within the game world Ellie is furious with Joel's murderer, Abby, and supposedly so is the player. As the player you have a strong bond with Joel, having played as him throughout the first game in the series. As the game continues, and you as Ellie continue to pursue Abby, both you as the player and Ellie as the protagonist become increasingly angry and obsessed. Suddenly, though, the game shifts. You as the player are forced to switch perspective, and for the second half of the game you play as Abby, learning about her motivations for
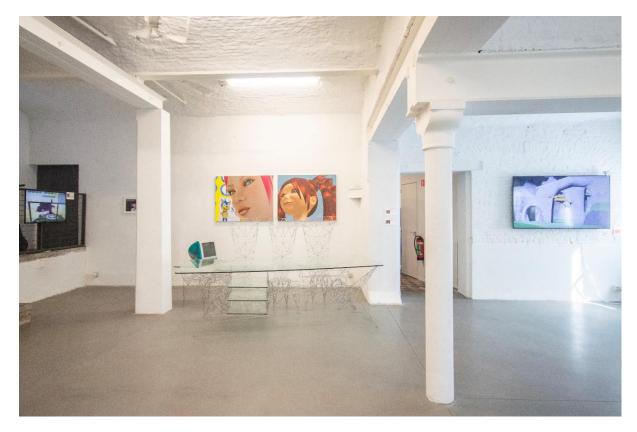
killing Joel and seeing the world from her point of view. This narrative gambit flawed me at the time, with the game accurately aligning my own emotions with Ellie's. By actively playing and controlling these characters, pushing and pulling their digital bodies, I had become inextricably linked, which I feel is one of many reasons why players become so attached to entirely virtual beings, developing fandoms and digital obsessions.

Having an intimate, empathetic, connection with a fabricated person or place is not only tied to the world of video games, however. Petra Szeman's practice, whose film *Openings!!!* (2022) is included in the exhibition, is embedded in anime and video game fandoms, analysing the discrepancies that occur when engaging in 21st century life, traversing and residing within multiple image worlds on a daily basis. A repeating motif within Szeman's work is that of the anime pilgrimage, pursuing and travelling to various places in Japan that have been used as inspiration, or directly copied, by anime animators to create the fictionalised versions of Japan that's observed when you watch anime. By visiting and documenting these spaces within their work, and by reproducing them in their own unique animation style, Szeman is simultaneously collapsing and contributing to the boundaries making up these layered worlds.

This collapsing of worlds is also observed in JODI's *Composite Club* (2007), a series of films made using the *EyeToy* (2003), a webcam for the *PlayStation 2* (2000). The camera enables players to interact with specially designed games through movement, colour detection and sound. Instead of filming themselves, however, JODI used the camera to record portions of blockbuster films, enabling the movements enacted within the films to "play" the different games. The results are disconcerting, and increasingly prescient in our algorithmically generated future, with the resulting works erasing any need for a human's presence, or even the slightest interaction.

As it stands, the video game industry, and the worlds that are being created by game developers, are in their infancy, with many wondering how video games will evolve and expand in the years to come. Despite mass layoffs across the industry over the past few years, I am quietly optimistic about both the future of the medium, and how artists will continue to reflect, build on and appropriate virtual worlds in emotional and empathetic ways. Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds is a small survey of sorts, capturing and observing how artists have been harnessing the digital medium as empathy machine for over twenty years. It's my hope that, in another twenty, I can look back on this exhibition and see how far both the industry and the artworks reflecting on it have come.
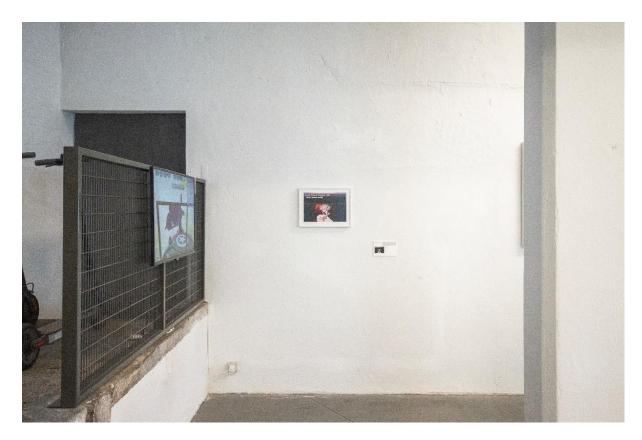
Bob Bicknell-Knight

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

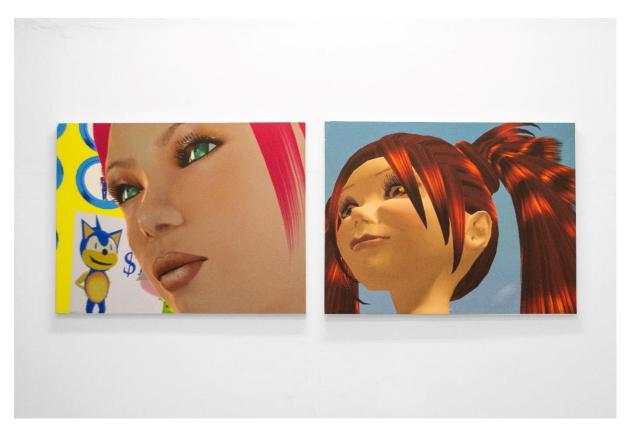Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Brody Condon
Suicide Solution, 2004
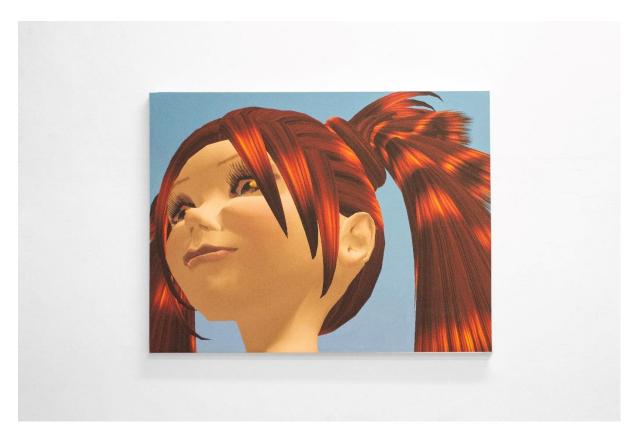DVD Documentation of In-Game Performance
19 min

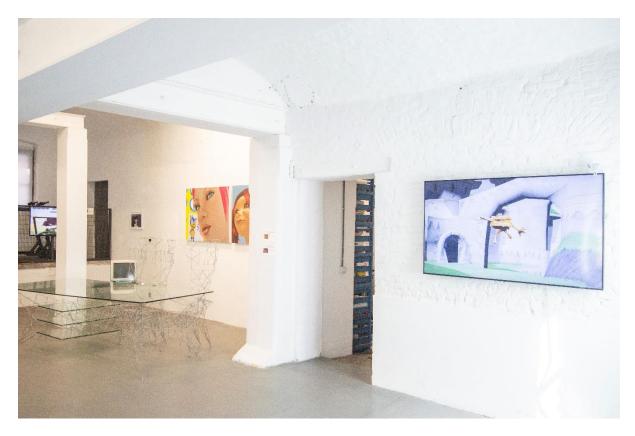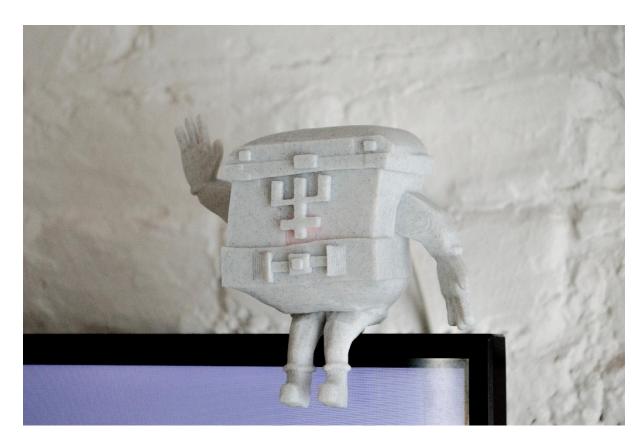Angela Washko
Heroines with Baggage, 2013
Print

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Eva and Franco Mattes
Portraits: Kaori Kamenev (2006)
Digital print on canvas

Eva and Franco Mattes
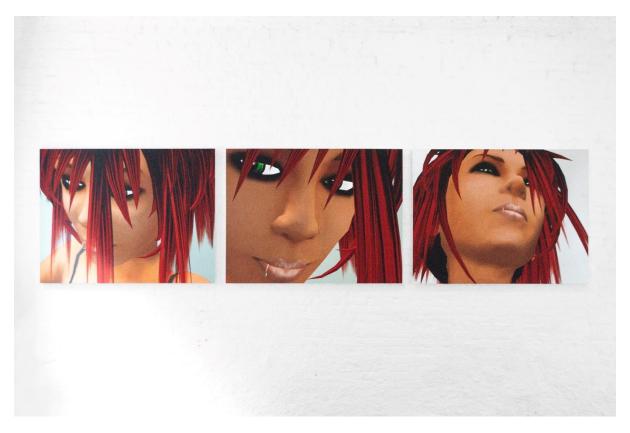Portraits: Flurry Splash (2006)
Digital print on canvas

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

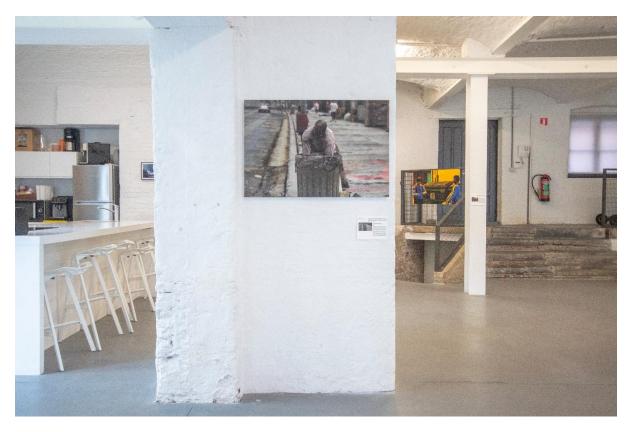Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Pay To Play, 2023
CGI video
11 min 56 sec

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Pay To Play, 2023
CGI video
11 min 56 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Chiho Aoshima
Fish Market, 1999
Print mounted on aluminium

Laurie Simmons
Untitled (Woman's Head), 1976
Gelatin silver print

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Assembly (Relief), 2023
3D printed PLA plastic, acrylic spray paint, steel bolts
49.4 x 72.4 x 56.5 cm

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Assembly (Relief), 2023
3D printed PLA plastic, acrylic spray paint, steel bolts
49.4 x 72.4 x 56.5 cm

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Time Out (Bitter), 2023
3D printed PLA plastic, acrylic spray paint, steel bolts
41 x 99.3 x 54.4 cm

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Time Out (Bitter), 2023
3D printed PLA plastic, acrylic spray paint, steel bolts
41 x 99.3 x 54.4 cm

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

an expanded transformative space that lifts you out of your immediate perceptual reality and into strange new relationships with the moving image.

Petra Szemán
Openings !!!, 2022
Digital video (color and sound)
18 min

Eva and Franco Mattes
Portraits: Tori Innis, 2006 – 2007
Digital print on canvas

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Alan Butler
Down and Out in Los Santos: 1Q_oUVZErUGvrSXaTjO9gA_0_0.jpg, 2015 – Present
Print
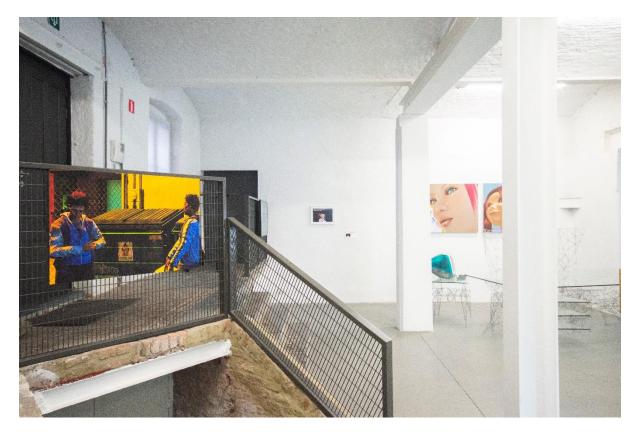
Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Ubermorgen
FideleFleurAsCerebelleInTheDaisyFields_Part1, 2021
31 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Petra Szemán
Openings !!!, 2022
Print

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Angela Washko
Heroines With Baggage: Don't Forget Me, 2013
Print

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Angela Washko
Heroines with Baggage, 2013
Print

Ubermorgen
FideleFleurAsCerebelleNoMoreDaisyFields_Part2, 2021
1 min 2 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Angela Washko
Heroines with Baggage, 2013
Print

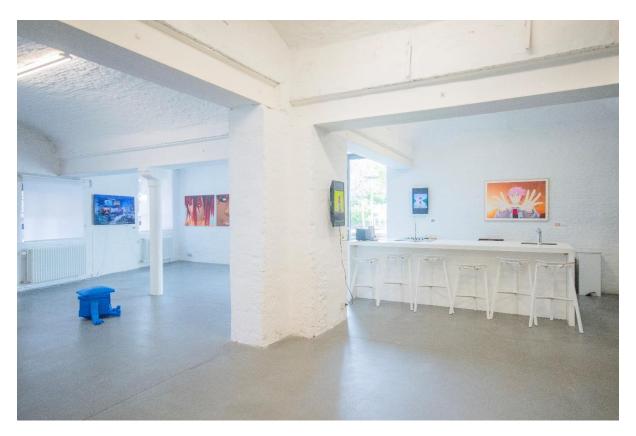Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View
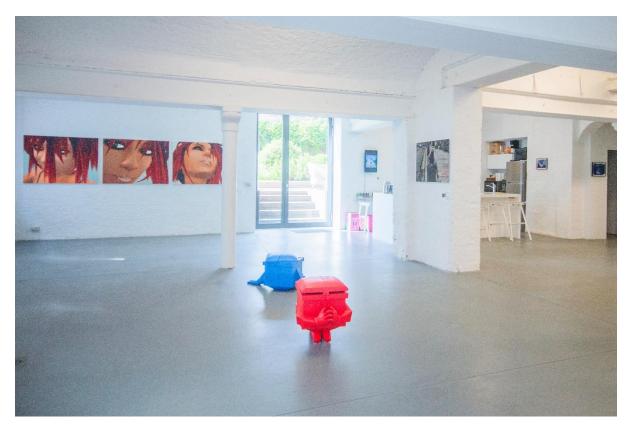
Angela Washko
Don't Leave Me!, 2012
Video
6 min 15 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Alan Butler
Down and Out in Los Santos: PS32016005.jpg, 2015 – Present
Print

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

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Installation View

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Installation View

Cory Arcangel and Paper Rad
Super Mario Movie, 2005
Modded Super Mario Brothers cartridge
14 min 34 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

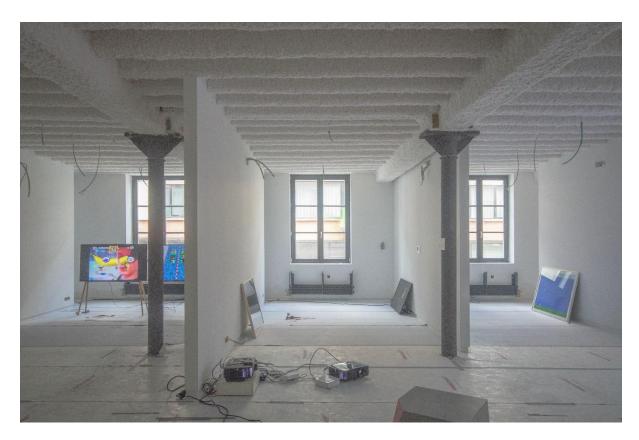Walter Langelaar
q3aSocialLadder, 2006
Video
9 min 34 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

JODI (Joan Heemskerk and Dirk Paesman)
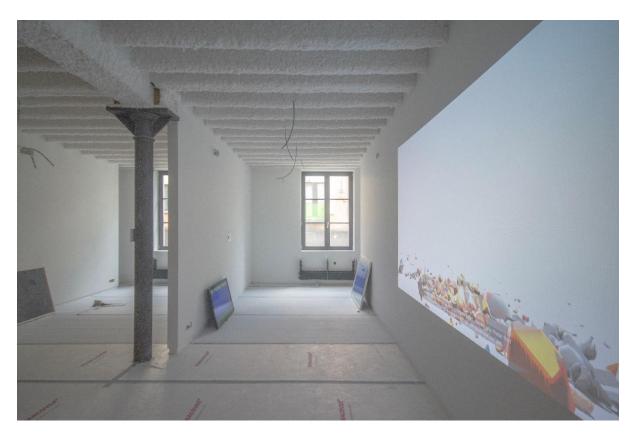Composite Club, 2007
Video

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Myfanwy Ashmore
Grand Theft Love Song, 2010
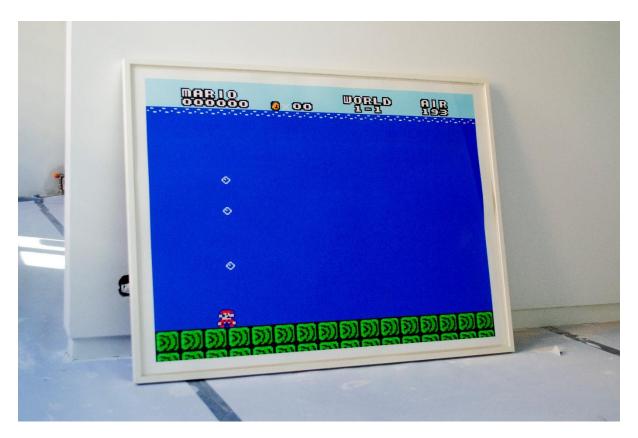Video
3 min 18 sec

Myfanwy Ashmore
Grand Theft Love Song, 2010
Print

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Myfanwy Ashmore
mario is drowning, 2004
Hacked video game rom
Video
6 min 48 sec

Myfanwy Ashmore
mario is drowning, 2004
Print

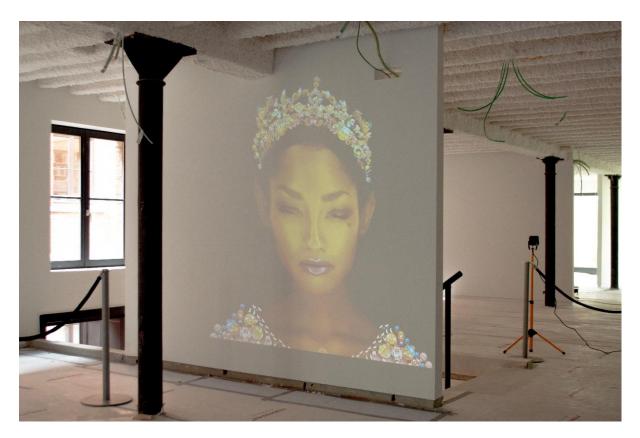Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Non-Player Character, 2022
4K video with sound
9 min 38 sec

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Non-Player Character, 2022
4K video with sound
9 min 38 sec

Digital Portraiture: Empathy In Virtual Worlds, 2024
Installation View

Eddo Stern
Emoticon, 2007
CGI film
3 min 30 sec