



Sometimes the Guys on the Top  
go too far. Then the Guys on the  
Bottom get together to turn one of  
their own people into a Boss.

# IN CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA HART LIMINAL FEEDBACK LOOPS AND HYBRID DUALITIES

TINA SAUERLAENDER

**ABSTRACT** | Claudia Hart's work range in media: architecture, painting/illustration, installation, eventually moving on to study animation – leading her to 3D animation art. Theory seems to be both the starting point and the end point of all of her artistic endeavours. Here, Hart, sits down with Tina Sauerlaender to discuss her work, career and how we are experiencing a crisis of truth.

**KEYWORDS** | 3D space, virtual reality, media art, installation.

**Tina Sauerlaender (TS):** Your whole career path has been a rather kaleidoscopic process of working with and in different media: after studying architecture, you became an editor and writer, and then focused on painting/illustration and installation, eventually moving on to study animation – leading you to 3D animation art, while continuing critical writing.

Viewing this hurricane of activity in retrospect: Does your praxis have a silent center – a philosophical question, which you continue to explore from every angle? – or is the only 'thing' standing in the eye of the hurricane yourself, the artist?

**Claudia Hart (CH):** I think I have to qualify my answer by providing a bit of personal narrative. What might appear from a distance to be a theoretical position on my part is actually a process of psychoanalytic self analysis. In other words, to use your terms, I position myself as both the question and the hurricane. In fact, I was born IN one, Hurricane Connie, so much so that my mother barely made it in a NY taxi to the hospital. I was therefore named after it: I am Claudia Constance. So I am the "I" of the hurricane, but also its deconstruction.

To further elaborate: my father was mentally ill, alternatively diagnosed as psychotic, psychitzophrenic or "border line," and was hospitalized and regularly delusional when I was a child. I resemble him in significant ways, enough so that my mother was afraid that I might also go mad. She therefore sent me, from the time I was quite young, to a child psychiatrist several times a week. I was continuously in therapy for twenty-five years, from childhood until the age of 31.

As a result, in many ways I personify the analytic process. It is my identity and my consciousness. Psychiatrists literally raised me. The way that I produce my art literally reflects this process. I permit the themes, images and symbols in my work to just "pop out" of the eye of the hurricane, and then I put on my other "meta" hat, to deconstruct those things in broad cultural terms, doing it as a means of generally deconstructing consciousness itself.

Deep reading, or deep analytical deconstruction, is my creative process. I am also both the subject and the object of it. I think that binary processes are additionally the sustaining theme of my work in general terms - the collapse of opposites



Figure 1. Claudia Hart, *A Child's Machiavelli*, Beatrice Books, 2019 edition

around a consistent set of poles: institutionalization versus the individual, the overly-determined system versus the intuitive, emotional or the subjective, logocentric patriarchy versus the feminine paradigm of the natural, madness versus reason, the will to power versus rule-driven culture.

I've translated and retranslated polemics across many platforms, permitting my "self" fluidity and multiplicity. My interest in the dichotomies of consciousness is also why, since the late 1990s, I came to focus on the symbolic and cultural meaning of digital tools as the driving force behind my practice. I am endlessly fascinated by them as a maker. The question that computer-driven systems pose: how can one use the rule-driven and overly determined -- software/code -- to improvise, so that something open-ended, ambiguous, and emotionally expressive might emerge.

**TS:** Theory seems to be both the starting point and the end point of all your artistic endeavours. This surely has to do with your own work as an editor and art critic, on the one hand, and the historical specificity of the architectural practice in which you were trained, on the other: At that particular time, it seems that the conceptualization of a building project was more important than its realization.

Do you notice a difference between yourself and artists who would rather focus only on the practice of art, as opposed to its theorization?

**CH:** I was born in 1955, and my first education was as an art historian at New York University in the late seventies, where many significant art historians taught. I took classes as a teenager with H. W. Janson, who wrote *The History of Art* in 1962, at that time, the bible of a version of art history that is now thought of as old school, anecdotal and descriptive. In 1975, Robert Rosenblum, one of my NYU professors, wrote *Modern Painting And The Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich To Rothko*, and this book - as well as the personage of Rosenblum himself - gripped me. Rosenblum was one of the first art historians to look at art in philosophical and cultural terms. His period of expertise was the 18th-century, the period of Enlightenment philosophy.

It is this cultural narrative that later provided me with the key polemic of my practice: the rationalistic, logo-centric idea of reason first constructed in the 18th century versus the paradigm of the "natural man," as personified by Jean Jacques Rousseau - the philosophe madman who went off to

the country to live isolated and I might add, also tormented, in nature. I later construed this polemic to mean another one: the bureaucratic, technocratic world of the patriarchy versus me: a romantic anarchistic warrior princess, a character of my own invention. It is a narrative that still fuels my practice.

In my first solo exhibition at the Pat Hearn Gallery in the East Village in 1989, eight years after studying with Rosenblum, I actually enacted Rousseau, my first inspiration as a student of Enlightenment art. I drew my own self portrait in his garb, and wrote text in his voice - the theme of an expansive intermedia exhibition. I produced text-based paintings, made sculptures, produced a super-8 movie where I performed an 18th-century androgynous character loosely based on Rousseau (later, in 1994, living in Berlin immediately after the Wall came down, that film was awarded the *frauen stipendium* by the city Senate juried by Valie Export). I photographed myself in 18th-century garb, to create an oblique mise-en-scene, a strategy that I still use.

Robert Rosenblum was heavily involved in the downtown New York contemporary art scene. He mentored me and encouraged me to go to architecture school at Columbia University, then the hotbed of theoretical "paper architecture," in the early 1980s.

I somewhat randomly found myself studying in the context of "architect-practitioners" in the epoche of the New York Five architects - Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Charles Gwathmey, John Hejduk and Richard Meier - who later built, but at that time, were far too radical to be commissioned for the millions of dollars required of glass and steel. I expanded on what I learned there when I began to make art, using the same techniques of presentation that I used in architecture school: multimedia, including drawings, photography, and poetic texts. I evolved from my days as an architectural student of philosopher architects into my own version of an of artist-practitioner. I don't think I've actually ever ventured far from that position. I have little contact with artists who focus only on practice - as opposed to practice plus its theorization.

**TS:** And as a professor yourself: Do you encourage your art students to prioritize theory?

**CH:** I've taught for the past thirteen years at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, one of several in the US known as humanities-oriented art schools, meaning theory oriented. The students who chose me and who I mentor, have artist-practitioner in mind as a goal, though I don't specifically encourage students to embrace theory. I think of art as a veil through which I can decipher human being. Nevertheless, I don't find work that merely illustrates theory very interesting.

**TS:** Can the picturemaking process itself propose a "picture theory" – as WJT Mitchell famously stated?

**CH:** My approach to media theory and art history is aligned with that of WJT Mitchell, who wrote about pictures in broader cultural terms. Like him, I am driven by questions of consciousness that I believe are driven by the history of representation. Though I admire Mitchell, my position is a personal hodgepodge of references mostly based on observation, meaning deep readings and deconstruction of art over forty years of personal observation.

I still think like an art historian, in terms of epochal periodicity. I believe that culture is driven by its technologies of representation, and we are entering a new age of digital representation, so a new age of consciousness. When I began to study the history of representation, starting with Renaissance perspective, I began a story that ended post-Enlightenment, in the era of the photographic. Now, we have passed into the post-photographic age of the computer. With each of the three epoques, technologies of representation drive the way western culture represents the real, and with the real, ideas about the "true" and the "beautiful" also shift. Currently, we are experiencing a crisis of truth, as evidenced by the madness of Trumplandia in America. I think this crisis was brought on by the fluidity of computer modeling and its unstable representations. This is the issue that preoccupies me at the moment: the mapping of the virtual and how it impacts cultural paradigms.

## “In many ways I personify the analytic process”

**TS:** The crisis of truth, you mention, gives way for polemic and polarization – in politics as well as in academia. How do you encounter this phenomenon in your profession?

**CH:** As I mentioned when describing my own conceptual processes, I believe that thought itself is polemical. Thought is a process of yes's and no's, of digital-coding's zeros and ones in contradistinction. It's not surprising then that intellectuals and academics tend to reify these polemics into narrow rule-driven ethical systems. The alt-right has exaggerated this tendency into one-liner populist advertising bylines in the domain of mediated politics. Academia mirrors this tendency. So yes, I've observed that academia is more rigid and rule-driven than ever, though ultimately, what do I know of academia? I teach in an art school! I do want to say that I live in the fallout of the kind of rigid polemics that I'm describing.

I teach advanced technologies. My pedagogy and the pedagogy of the x3d program - now taught by many and at



Figure 2. Claudia Hart, *The Seasons*, 2007, 11 minutes - 30 second loop for monumental monitor + projection



Figure 3. Claudia Hart, "Kiki.obj," 2017, Gif made in celebration of the Dada Centennial. <http://www.linkartcenter.eu/dadaclub/tag/kiki-obj/index.html>

many liberal arts schools - is decidedly not "commercial" or oriented towards training designers or future digital-pipeline workers. My classes are based on studio practice, as indicated by their titles: Virtual Installation, Digital Bodies, Digital Sculpture, Virtual Painting, Atmospheric Animation, Mediated Ceramics, Mediated Weaving, etc, etc. Nevertheless, up to the moment of this interview, I've been marginalized, prejudged and often insulted by colleagues. My students are blocked from receiving awards or fellowships by colleagues from the "regular" art world. My students and I are called "complicit." I can only assume that means complicit with the values of hyper-capitalism. It's amusing, because media-art stands notoriously outside of the art market and commercial film distribution. Media artists tend to function at the low end of the art-economic spectrum.

I can elaborate on this by describing an event from 2010. At the College Art Association convocation in Chicago at that time, Rachel Clark, with whom I also collaborated on *The Real Fake Manifesto*, led a panel entitled *Under fire: 3D Animation Pedagogy and Industry Complicity in New Media Education*. We rejected media education as a version of industrial "jobs" training. On our panel we proposed strategies for teaching software art outside of the industrial "sweatshop" pipeline that necessitated narrow skill sets to prepare young people to work in entertainment and design businesses.

Instead we proposed integrating art theory and history into technical training, unusual at that time. The conference panel evolved into a kind of spiritual revival meeting. Professors from schools across the USA shared stories of alienation

and rejection by both "sides" of the educational divide: the humanities and the polytechnical. It was startling and restorative.

These are tales of polarization. In art academia at the very least, there is a clear polarization of the good (mediums that have, since the seventies, been associated with progressive art - documentary film, installation-based work, conceptual art, social practice, performance) and the so-called evil/complicit (computer graphics, formerly used almost exclusively by advertising and game industries). I've experienced this personally in relation to the behavior of my colleagues, and also observed the disproportionately harsh criticism reaped on young media-art students by them.

**TS:** In the light of the present day, your book, *A Child's Machiavelli – A Primer To Power*, published in 1998, already seems to tell the tale of the degeneration of contemporary discourse.

**CH:** I illustrated and wrote *A Child's Machiavelli* inspired by Niccolò Machiavelli's Renaissance treatise, *The Prince*, the first book of political philosophy. My ironic kiddie version began as a series of oil paintings and small catalog, produced by the Realismus Studio, at the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, the activist left Kunstverein in Berlin in 1995.

The catalog was eventually republished as an expanded hardcover by Penguin USA, and later in German and French editions. While keeping to the meaning of the original, I

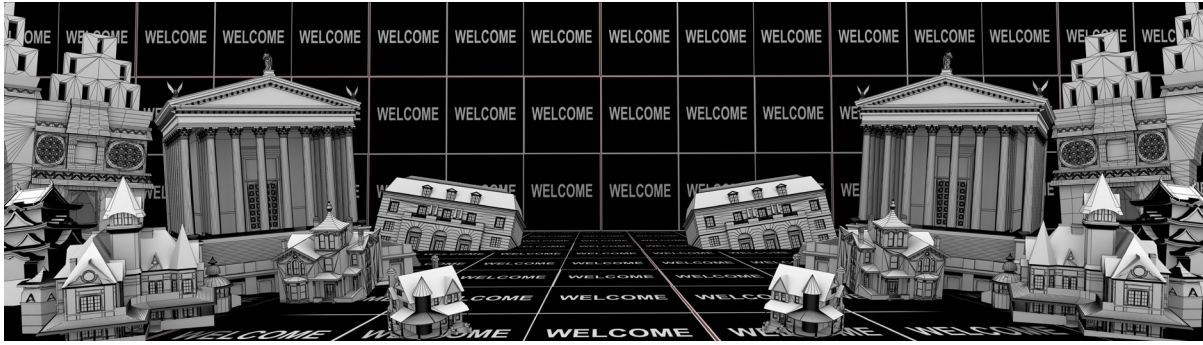


Figure 4. Claudia Hart, *A Doll's House*, 2015, 12 minute loop, video projection for monumental dual-channel seamless installation, music by Kurt Hentschlagler.

rewrote *The Prince* reflecting street values and the voice of late-nineties youth culture - as if Machiavelli's book, meant to advise kings on seizing power was a primer to teach good manners to small children. The book has proven prescient, uncannily prefiguring the brutal tenor of contemporary US public discourse.

My strategy then also reflected those embraced by the 1990s art world. Mimicking the visuals of a picture book, I appropriated 1920s children's illustrations known for their sugary sweetness. The irony and twisted humor of *A Child's Machiavelli* is derived from its combination of opposites: the saccharine speech of kiddie books and the unvarnished reality of American politics. The book went out of print in 2000, but has been continuously traded on the second-hand book market. In 2019, *A Child's Machiavelli* was published by Beatrice Books and edited by Patrick Reynolds. The original 1998 Penguin edition has been redesigned and is back on the market, really exciting in that it closes my life-circle.

**TS:** Previously, you turned Machiavelli's treatise into a children's book, and some of your recent work is in fact inspired by a children's book – *Alice in Wonderland*. Since your work is in many ways of feminist critique of male-dominated techno- and gaming culture, does the figure of Alice as muse or avatar try to work through some of these issues for the XR age?

**CH:** I've been working on the Alice series for the past 6 years, and have just closed the chapter. It is intermedia, as has been all of my work, since my first Jean-Jacques Rousseau show! It is composed of mediated live performances, 3D-animation installations, augmented-reality installations and VR worlds. I used my strategy of collapsing opposites with *A Child's Machiavelli*, I turning the sweet into the vile and back again. With Alice, the paradoxical structure was built in. Lewis Carroll's fantasy novels, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, invert reason. The Alice world is an irrational world seen "through the looking glass" in which power structures are defused by madness, and the professorial is tamed by silliness. I love this. It is my native domain. It is a feminist critique of the logocentric and phallogocentric!

I also used an idea of endless digital copy-pastes to embody my Alice world. There are at this point 13 Alices - 13 different performers who come together in different configurations at different times. My Alices are fluid like the digital domain, but they are also gender fluid. Some are she, some are he, some are they, some are drag but identifying he. A recent 3-channel 3D animation from 2018, *Alice Unchained*, gender blends by mixing motion-captured movements harvested from several living people.

**TS:** And music is a key element in this work. You have collaborated with a number of important composers and musicians throughout your career. How did the collaboration for *Alice Unchained* come about?

**CH:** I think of *Alice Unchained* as a virtual chamber for chamber music. This is because it is the third of eight works loosely inspired by Carroll's Alice, all made in collaboration with the composer Edmund Campion, the Director of CNMAT, the Center for New Music at UC Berkeley. Alice mashes 3D animation, motion-captured live performance, and music performed by motion-captured live musicians whose sound is analyzed in real-time and remixed in the bodies of sculptural avatars. It feeds-back the virtual and the living, blending them together in a liminal, uncanny mix.

Ed and I met when we were both fellows at the American Center in Paris, when I was working on another version of my Rousseau show, and he was a young composer-in-residence at IRCAM, the French institute for science about sound and avant-garde electro-acoustical music linked to the Centre Georges Pompidou. Ed was one of the first composers to use a computer as a compositional tool. Our positions were related. Ed came up with a "polemical" system of composition, pitting the personal and improvisational against computer generated formalism. We both embraced a world where we built systems and then improvisationally destroyed them: an irrational versus a logocentric.

IRCAM at that time was heavily under the influence of French Formalism as it was defined by the IRCAM founder, Pierre Boulez. At that time, in 1991, Ed and I shared the same creative strategy and were both inspired by the technology



Figure 5. Claudia Hart, *The Flower Matrix*, 2017, mixed reality installation including VR for Oculus Touch, Audio, Augmented Reality wallpaper, upholstered seating and floor cover, music by Edmund Campion



Figure 6. Claudia Hart, *Alice Unchained*, 2018, mixed reality installation including monumental 3-channel video projection and VR for Vive, music by Edmund Campion



theorist Donna Haraway, whose *Cyborg Manifesto* imagined a Utopian future in which advanced bio-technologies would liberate human culture from the constraints of gender binaries.

So for *Alice Unchained*, I directed and motion-captured professional wrestler Isaias Velazquez and choreographer Kristina Isabelle, mixing their data together to create a singular, 'cyborg' choreography. Acting in parallel, Ed composed the music with live drummers who are bound to computer generated click-tracks. These approaches together add up to a new chamber music experience, one strangely referential to the 19th century salon for chamber music from the time of the first *Alice*, but only now existing in the liminal space between the real and the digital.

**TS:** One thing we often hear from artists working in mixed reality is that it is a "brave new world" in terms of design conventions, user-interface protocols, and aesthetics. Have you found this to be the case?

**CH:** I started working with VR four years ago, introduced to it by one of my former students, Alfredo Salazar Caro who is co-founder of "DiMODA," the Digital Museum of Digital Art. I did my first VR piece, *The Process of History*, for his first iteration of that project. What struck me about the Oculus experience is that it elicits delight and awe in viewers, no matter the imagery (although I've seen it used to simulate horror and abjection with similar emotional intensity).

From that first work, I began to develop a more complex version of it, *The Flower Matrix*, that included an augmented-reality chamber - a lounge made specifically for viewing it, using the same animated elements that appear in the VR works, but also appear as animated augments viewed through *The Looking Glass*, my custom AR app, triggered by the decor of the chamber, all covered by decorative patterns doubling as computer codes. I thought of the AR lounge as yet another kind of liminal space, halfway between the real world and the purely artificial fake world of VR. *The Flower Matrix* slowly evolved over a period of several years, 2017-18, during which I produced six installations at different cultural institutions around the world.

These projects allowed me to beta test the concept and to personally experience how people experience VR, tweaking the piece sequentially. I think of *The Flower Matrix* as a physicalized computer interface. With this construct (an AR chamber designed in relationship to specific VR environments), I have designed a frame for experiencing and employing successive levels of immersion, meant to soften the harsh transition into the VR world accessed through VR headsets, another but still very awkward version of a sculptural interface. Because a user occupies my AR chamber

with their entire body, it heightens user-experience. Because of this users can understand VR phenomenally and feel that their physical bodies have entered an immaterial, artificial VR world rather than just their head and eyes. *The Flower Matrix* feeds-back the virtual and the live, blending them together in a liminal, uncanny mix.

As I mentioned earlier, I was inspired by Donna Haraway since the 1990s, when I produced my first 3D animations. So, for *The Flower Matrix* mixed-reality setup, following Haraway's cyborg paradigm, I imagined blending together the physical real world and the ephemeral one in an uncanny cocktail. Its effect on people is hypnotic. Users' experience is trance-like. When they finally don the VR headset, after spending some time exploring the AR decor with a computer tablet in hand, they seem to me to be in a state of ecstasy. They feel good! They walk around stroking each other and the physical elements in the room, breathlessly, unsure as to whether the things they are touching are physical or ephemeral. This has something to do with the subject matter of *The Flower Matrix*, as reflected in its visual esthetic and related music.

*The Flower Matrix* is, in its totality, a Haraway "cyborg," a hybrid environment using a custom augmented-reality application made for physical installation in the real world. This physical environment is a prototype for a new kind of computer interface, taking the form of real-world architecture by means of augmented-reality embossed decorative elements designed for hyper-immersion in virtual-reality. Inside *The Flower Matrix*, viewers dwell in a disorienting loop of modalities where the rational order of reason and technology has turned in on itself.

**TS:** In a number of your artworks, we see you repurposing 3D models that you find on the internet, such as gaming environments and dollhouses. Do you see this as a continuation of the modernist staging of the 'found object'?

**CH:** Yes absolutely! I started this with *Virtual Installation*, a class at SAIC that I initiated at SAIC in 2008. Google made its 3D model "Warehouse" open online in 2006. I was interested in the possibility of installation-based virtuality, so I showed my students the 90s "scatter" artists who came to prominence in the nineties like Jessica Stockholder, Felix Gonzalez Torres, Jason Rhodes and Cady Nolan. I showed students how to access the free models provided by the Warehouse to do virtual-installation work.

As pedagogy, it was great as a first project - they just had to build a basic model of a minimal, clean-white box gallery environment, arrange found models, light, then render them. Digital ready-mades! The models in the Warehouse were also loaded with cultural meaning - they are ready-made Internet memes produced by workers in the advertising industry, then thrown online for others to use for free in the spirit of the Internet "share-wear" code.

## “I am a Romantic”

The models come in specific categories of consumerism: cars, electronics, furniture (Ikea!), and cultural clichés (the Venus De Milo or Michaelangelo's David). It was dynamic! Artists like the avatar commonly known as LaTurbo Avedon helped to clarify the genre by founding and designing Panther Modern in 2013. This was an architectural “file-based exhibition space” created with found 3D models. The Panther has expanded to seventeen installation rooms, with a new area being added to the virtual model by each new artist. It is a greatest-hits website populated by post-photo-simulation documentation of virtual installations created by the great virtual Scatter artists from the first Post-Internets.

**TS:** And as final question: What are your thoughts on the development that art historians, who generally use texts as their medium of knowledge, now become – in a certain aspect – image makers themselves. Does this bring the opposite poles in art – the academic art historian and the practicing artist – closer together?

**CH:** I am among those who describe the digital era as “post-reading.” Internet interactive design with its buttons and icons have introduced a hybrid mode between pictures and language, and digital art historians, critics and journalists do embrace it. I'm thinking of sites that integrate infographics, pictures and text that hyperlink to them as being part of the

trajectory of seventies Concept Art. It is “critical,” which to me also makes it pedagogical and didactic. There are related artists working with interactive systems as art, producing games with political, sociological, or some other informational content.

My approach to art-making is different. I imagine the interactive game world as a place for site-specific installations. I use interactivity and procedural real-time coding strategies to create surrealistic, poetic worlds imbued with sadness and melancholy. I am a Romantic: I embrace Baudelaire's canon of the terrible and the beautiful. My art for the past five years is graphical and Pop - before that, I was Neoclassical. The graphics that I use are appropriated corporate logos, perverse emoji, the heraldry of collapsed empires and computer symbols. Hidden hermetic meanings dwell beneath my surface. Those meanings are critical of the hyper-capitalist world of commercial games.

But what's most important to me is that my animations, performances and VR worlds possess a beautiful sadness. Their specific educational value is not so important. Their ability to convey my deep sorrow at the loneliness I feel as a denizen of the world of hyper-Capitalist mediation is what I value, no matter what might be my conscious intentions when I create them. And the “me” that wears the critic's hat is just fine with that.

**TINA SAUERLAENDER** is an art historian, curator and writer based in Berlin. She holds a MA in art history from Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich and is a Ph.D. candidate at The University of Art and Design Linz (Austria). Her research topic is artistic self-representation in digital art. For 10 years, she has been working as an international curator with her exhibition platform *peer to space*. In her exhibitions, she focuses on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and society. Together with curator Erandy Vergara she developed the exhibition series *Critical Approaches in Virtual Reality Art* and realized projects like *Envisioning the Future. Other World Perspectives in Virtual Reality Art* (Halcyon Arts Lab, Washington, DC, 2018) or *Speculative Cultures. A Virtual Reality Art Exhibition* (Kellen Gallery, Parsons/The New School, New York, 2019). She is the co-founder of Radiance VR, an international online research platform for virtual reality experiences in visual arts. She is the founder of the SALOON, an international network for women working in art.

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**CLAUDIA HART** emerged as part of that generation of 90s intermedia artists in the “identity art” niche, but now updated through the scrim of technology. Her work is about issues of the body, perception, nature collapsing into technology and then back again. Everything is fluid in it including gender. She considers it Cyborg-ish, creating liminal spaces, and is in love with the interface between real and unreal because it is a space of contemplation and transformation. Hart was very early into virtual imaging, using 3D animation to make media installations and projections, then later as they were invented, other forms of VR, AR, and objects using computer-driven production machines, all adapted from the same computer models. She is considered a pioneer in this, taking a feminist position in a world without women when she started 20 years ago, inspired by the French media artists of the 60s. Hart produces real things, not just mediated ones, meaning “mediated objects” (digitally enabled sculptures, drawings, paintings, wallpaper, conceptual crafts), and projections on painted walls, and ultimately on human bodies wearing sculptural screens of some sort. She produces bodies of work shown in galleries that then inspire performances that, for the past five years, have been shown in the experimental theater and performance context. Hart’s work is symbolist and poetic, not really narrative, but vaguely so, and is mesmerizing, hypnotic and formalist. Bodies or natural forms like flowers always appear in it. Hart calls her work, “post photography,” and has created a body of theoretical writings and exhibitions based on this concept. The things in her worlds are generated from computer models instead of captured with a camera. At SAIC, she developed a pedagogic program based on this concept. It is called Experimental 3D, and is the first art-school curriculum teaching simulations technologies in the art world.

She lives in both New York and Chicago, shows with Transfer and bitforms galleries and is married to the Austrian media artist Kurt Hentschlagler.

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