

Petra Szemán  
Sky Above, Voice Within  
14th – 28th June 2021  
Curated by Bob Bicknell-Knight

After spending, sometimes hours at a time, looking directly into the bright light of a screen, immersed within the virtual world of a video game, I might get up and stretch, go to the bathroom or make myself a snack. During these moments, when the controller is still and the game is waiting for me to return, the digital character will begin cycling through a series of idle animations; subtle movements indicating their vegetative state, either bored by the brief pause in action or excited to regain some sort of autonomy over their body.

Idle animations often provide the player with delicate hints at the game character's personality traits, contributing to the creation of a realistic and well-developed identity, sometimes more so than a forced cutscene ever could. During these moments of downtime the game world continues to advance onwards, a complex ecosystem refusing to pause in spite of it being built as a private playground for the player character.

Petra Szemán is an artist who uses animation to explore the fictional elements of our collective existence, poking holes in physical and digital space by inserting a virtual version of herself into different realities. For *Sky Above, Voice Within* Szemán has created a 24-hour video compilation which positions her digital character Yourself in different locations within the popular 2011 video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, synchronised to replicate the time of day in the physical world.

Throughout the 24-hour period the character of Yourself, Szemán's virtual replica, sits idle, watching the aesthetics of time distort the digital landscapes, waiting for an unknown player to return so that she can continue on her quest. *Sky Above, Voice Within* welcomes and rewards those who take the time to observe and return to the exhibition throughout its duration, hinting at the hidden depths to the character of Yourself, and Szemán's own prolific video-based practice.

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Petra Szemán (b. 1994, Budapest, Hungary) is a moving image artist working with animation and game-like immersive installations. Her practice is centred around instances in which real life can be experienced as fictional. Using a virtual version of herself as a protagonist across various digital realms, she explores liminal spaces and threshold situations, looking to dissect the ways our memories and selves are constructed within a landscape oversaturated with fiction (both on- and off-screen). Turning away from thinking of the cyberspace as a radically 'other' realm, Petra hopes to walk the line situated between dystopian and utopian frameworks.

Szemán is a recent Fine Art graduate from Newcastle University (2013-2017), and has exhibited since graduation at NEoN Festival in Dundee, Scotland; Big Screen Southend; BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, as well as various galleries across the North-East of England, Continental Europe and East-Asia. After spending the past two years in Japan, developing new work as a recipient of a research scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education and Culture (2018-2020), Petra is now based in the North East again with a studio in Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Bob Bicknell-Knight (b. Suffolk, UK) is an artist, curator and writer, working in installation, sculpture, painting, video, and other digital media. His work is influenced by surveillance capitalism and responds to the hyper consumerism of the internet. Utopia, dystopia, automation, surveillance and digitization of the self are some of the themes that arise through my critical examination of contemporary technologies.

Bicknell-Knight is the founder and director of *isthisit?*, a platform for contemporary art that's exhibited over 800 artists since I created it in May 2016. He has spoken on panel discussions and given artist talks about his practice and the platform at *panke.gallery*, Berlin; Contemporary Calgary, Canada; Tate Modern, London; University of Cambridge, Cambridge; Camberwell College of Arts, London and Goldsmiths, University of London, London.