Holy Fire: just one step

[YVES_BERNARD]

In 2006, when I curated the exhibition *Art+Game*, something new happened: I had the pleasure of receiving a visit from a Belgian art collector! I discovered that new media art was starting to appeal to art collectors, and that, as usual, Belgian collectors were the most daring and innovative, displaying genuine passion and curatorial flair, and travelling the world to meet artists and see the few galleries specialized in the field. This reminded me of an old gallery owner friend I used to see in the mid 90s. Alongside his trade in famous painters and engravers of the 20th century, he was addicted to art cd-roms, the interactive works of art on cd-rom that I too used to collect.

These first published electronic artworks were collected as rare books, tangible objects supporting the new software revolution.

Cd-roms died out as an art media, and I lost touch with my friend, but when I caught up with him recently, I saw he was collecting computer works by major contemporary new media artists. Something was clearly changing in relations between so-called 'new media art', the art collectors and the art market.

Having been involved in this specialized new media art community for more than 10 years, I attend the usual electronic arts festivals, an opportunity to meet the growing community of international new media artists, activists and developers. In parallel, since the beginning of the 80s where I started to work with computers, and through my personal networks, most of my friends and contacts were and still are in the contemporary art world but I never see them at these digital art events. There, for years, I have been listening to the same endless debates and conferences about the gap between the contemporary and new media art worlds. At the Berlin Transmediale in 2007, Olia Lialina, who was taking part in one of these discussions, made a difference (in my opinion at least) with a wholly pragmatic approach: she advocated simply adapting works to the white cube, in view of the fact that the tools and technologies needed to package them for acceptance by the contemporary art milieu were already available [1]. But in 2008, again at Transmediale, the debate following the presentation of MediaArts2.0 by Alexei Shulgin once more turned into the classic, futile polemic over what constitutes art. If we want a real debate on the relations between new media art and contemporary art, we should have it in the context of contemporary art itself, not waiting for recognition from the contemporary art people but going to them.

The idea of *Holy Fire* came about last summer when I was looking for someone with good knowledge of the Second Life art scene to help us with our project *The Gate*.

This is how I met Domenico Quaranta. It turned out to be a great partnership and we presented *The Gate* at the inaugural exhibition of the new iMAL venue at the end of 2007. Domenico and Fabio Paris, owner of the Fabio Paris Art Gallery, had an interesting project in mind: they wanted to build a kind of alliance of galleries supporting new media artists, with the idea of holding the first event at an international contemporary art fair, a good place to meet the contemporary art world and collectors. This project corresponded perfectly to my own ideas, and I was foolish enough to propose it to Art Brussels...

[1] See transcript on
http://www.mikro.in-berlin.de/wiki/tiki-index.php?page=Olia+Lialina

An Exhibition with Collectible Works

Holy Fire is probably one of the first exhibitions to propose collectible new media artworks, i.e. works which are on the art market. Some belong to private collections, others come from galleries or artists' collections, but all have a potential or current life on the art market. This is a new thing for new media art, and being collectible means a lot: this artwork is no longer impossible to maintain, or difficult to install.

A work appealed to an art lover to the point where he decided to acquire it, as he would do for a painting, photography or sculpture, to be installed in his home, office or institution. The work has financial value and can be sold or given to someone else, with proof of authenticity.

Art Appliances

The solutions for producing collectible arts out of a 50 year old parallel art practice based on immaterial processes, computation and ephemeral actions as is the case of many net art projects, moreover often supported by hardware and software destined for obsolescence, are as varied as the works on show at *Holy Fire*. Of course we are in the Digital Age and technological progress helps a lot: ubiquitous affordable computing, fast wireless network and efficient display technologies. And we know this is just the beginning. But the artists also had to make their creations appealing to the contemporary art world. Three main approaches emerged: the derived product, the self-contained technological object and the open source project. The derived product is typical of many net artists (e.g. the Mattes) who produce lasting objects on traditional media such as digital prints, videos, sculptures, from their online

performances or net projects.

The self-contained technological object approach (e.g. Shulgin, Boredomresearch) aims to get round the problems of computer-based technologies (in terms of installation, maintenance and preservation) by providing an object composed of its own electronics, ideally robust, zero maintenance, and long-lasting. The open source approach (Reas) is the complete opposite: it is just software released with its source code, digital media and documentation, without any references to specific hardware. The code and the universal nature of its programming language should guarantee its portability on any existing or future computer platform.

There are many combination approaches, e.g. net artists packaging works as computer-based objects (Zanni, Bruno) or the whole generation of young artists (Arcangel, Slocum) using obsolete 8bit game consoles and computers to explore the aesthetics of low-resolution sounds and images, hijacking these collectible old-tech objects which are part of our contemporary culture.

New Economies for Autonomy

The art market offers new sources of income for new media artists. Up to now, these have been limited – when they exist – to public funding from institutions and governments, sometimes dictated by politics.

An art market can help develop a new economy through direct relations between artists and art consumers, confirming the artists' social role and the support of the people who are increasingly looking for something different from mass-produced digital gadgets.

Art of the Digital Age, Yet Connected to Art History

Holy Fire presents 27 artists with a broad range of approaches and practices. Many share strong connections with 20th century art. For instance, one can see direct links between Casey Reas and conceptual artists such as Sol LeWitt, or the minimalist legacy in the work of John Simon.

The artists shown at Holy Fire offer up a portrait of our time, of the technological world of networks, media, and game and internet culture we live in, with its new expectations, myths, beliefs, desires, fears, dreams and forms of alienation. They interpret, process and portray this contemporary world: see the portraits of the web by Lialina & Espenshied, or those of the strange creatures from Second Life by the Mattes, and witness the psychological syndrome of digital life offered by Ubermorgen.com; the destruction of the image and representation by Mark Napier; Shane Hope's future artifacts generated by endless executions of biological or computer-based code; Jodi's absurd, surreal explorations of computer game glitches; the emoticons of online communities by Eddo Stern, and Antoine Schmitt's ubiquitous business graphs coldly monitoring our lives. These artists speak about our time using the tools, media and techniques of our time.

New Media Art, Contemporary Art, Avant-garde and Research

Contemporary art, like all other activities in human life, is seamlessly integrating with the technologies of our world. And the specific characteristics of digital technologies and new media art – interactivity, processes, simulation, network, computation and information space – not only give rise to radically new objects but also virally and pervasively modify traditional forms of art. *Holy Fire* gives examples of all this. For the latter, see for instance Staelhe's new photography using net based time-space recording, or the continuous realtime conceptual painting of Casey Reas, or Chatonsky's 3D stereolithograhic sculpture. For the former, consider all interactive works which use the visitor's gestures and image, or the works based on artificial life (Chevalier), or those using network, media and computation process (Bruno), or that which challenges the solidity of artistic objects with a form of art which is "permanently in a state of flux, always evolving, always a potential for change, never a final object" (Napier).

New media art, as we know it today, will merge into contemporary art. But an avant-garde of artists, activists, researchers will always be at the forefront, actively defining, questioning and anticipating the ongoing evolution of technologies and the new languages they allow.

We are witnessing a major paradigm shift in contemporary civilization. The universal nature of the digital representations associated with ubiquitous computing and networks to generate, process, transmit, share any data, information, knowledge or symbolic representation is heralding major cultural and intellectual changes. For the first time, we have machines to generate and process any kind of symbolic information; we have a pervasive technical infrastructure able to extend human thinking, bringing to the forefront notions such as collective

intelligence, the intellectual empowerment of individuals and small groups, and the possibility of actions. After the industrial revolution where machines produced objects, we have now machines able to produce and process information and knowledge. The core of the creative act now revolves around designing the software engines to explore the new horizons of symbolic digital objects these can generate, process and exchange.

The contemporary art world rejected Tekne, but now more than ever before technology is a fundamental issue for artists and researchers. Art and science are closer than ever before, and together with scientists, artists are actively participating in the definition and evolution of technology and of their own technological tools. This is the only way to guarantee complete freedom of action and experimentation. Avant-garde artists and software developers, scientists and researchers explore models and formalize our thought processes, and they develop the tools and expertise behind the digital platforms which support the making, sharing and processing of our cultural artifacts, our social behaviours and our symbolic representations.

Far from the usual codes and conventions of official culture and mainstream contemporary art, from the blindness and controlled behaviours generated by consumer technologies or programmed into commercial software, experiments have to be performed, tools have to be developed and issues regarding all aspects of this revolution have to be raised and discussed: political issues as well as aesthetic and scientific questions.

Holy Fire is an exhibition presenting works from the last 15 years of avant-garde (new media) art which are now reaching the contemporary art market. It had to be done today, in parallel with the continuous hidden stream of experimental, critical and research activities undertaken by curators, activists, artists, researchers and organisations.