Virtual Art – the Aura of the Digital
Fortunately it is unknown where the journey will end

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An interview from Susanne Schuricht with Dr. Oliver Grau, Berlin, Germany

Dr. Oliver Grau is a media art historian researching and lecturing at the Department of Art History at Humboldt University, Berlin. He studied History of the Arts, economics, archaeology and Italian literature in Hamburg, London and Siena. He also did field re- search in the USA and Japan. Since 1988 he is head of the German Science Foundations' project on History of the Arts and Media Theory of Virtual Reality, since 2001 leading the project immersive art. Besides he and his team are developing a database for Virtual Art, which gives an overview of interactive installations over the last decades. He has published widely in Europe, the USA and Japan. His research focuses on the history of illusion and immersion in media and art, the history of the idea and culture of telepre- sence and telecommunication, genetic art and artificial intelligence. Dr. Oliver Grau is author of the book Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion published in 2003 by MIT Press.

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When did you first get in touch with computers?

In the seventies, 1973 or 1974, when my father brought home the then brand new computer game "Pong". He was teaching than at the University of Hamburg "digital technology" and had covered it himself with his students at the lab. I could always play their results at home with my friends. So, long before the arrival of computer games on the market, we stuck coloured plastic foils to the screen of our black and white TV thus extending the variety of Pong enormously.

How would you describe your research in a single sentence?

How do people live with images? Which kind of powers, suggestions and elaborateness' may images gain upon their spectators – historically as well as presently; how may we renew our media literacy over again?

Where do your interests for virtual reality and virtual arts come from?

After my civil service and studies I traveled extensively through Polynesia, Central Asia and the Americas. Virtual Reality, the idea of placing a person into an illusionary loca- tion through immersive images was at the beginning of the nineties associated with a hype that is hardly comprehensible nowadays: There where supporters and utopians on one side and apocalyptics on the other, as Virilio and Kamper. They assumed that we were about to get rid of the physical body and become lost in computer-generated worlds. For me, as someone who liked to travel extensively and who explored the boundaries of his body, Virtual Reality was a intruiging phenomenon; Explosive,perhaps even threa- tening from a politics of the body point of view – yet full of fascinating possibilities. Insofar as my desire for faraway places merged with my scientific curiosity for virtual worlds created out of the computer. I wanted to explore what was happening to the Other, the auratic force that distinguishes other cultures as such, in the momen- tarily interconnectedness of matrix and cyberspace.

How does the concept of the piece of art change under the suppositions of com- puter generated, virtual quality?

In a nutshell one might say: The work of art looses its local reference.
It is open, process oriented, increasingly interactive, three- sometimes even poly-dime- sional and temporally variable. Before us lies the question what a piece of art is; as it cannot exist without a spectator, a user. Should we attempt to assign Benjamins classic term of the Aura to the digital work of art, it looses its Aura in one sense through the loss of an original, as there may theoretically be an infinite number of identical copies. On the other hand the Aura may be re-evoked by a virtous Player who creates a vivid moment of liveliness, of uniqueness, into the seemingly variegated digital art. With all of this we have to keep in mind that digital pieces of art stand before a massive pro- blem of preservation, yet unheard of. Works, that perhaps have been created as recently as ten years ago are almost impossible to exhibit as operating systems and storage media have developed since then. Additionally there have been no elaborate strategies for the conservation of digital art!

How should media art by exhibited, collected? Do museums still make sense?

Oliver Grau

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Artists that have enriched us with intruiging pieces of work may be unable to show us these credentials of the most recent history. Something, not only the artist but also a culturally interested society that has recognized this problem is seriously worried about. A society that relies on archives und preserves the past in a cultural memory cannot afford that these pieces of art, that aesthetically comprise our times, fade away.
This would be unjustifiable. We need strategies to preserve these pieces of art. Primarily this accounts for documentation. This is the foundation to confirm that these art works have been created during the past years and that we wish reasonable politics of collection to be considered; we suggest these kinds of technologies, those methods of conservation and the following institutional involvements. I expect a joint initiative between artists, computing centres, technology museums, manufacturers and traditional museums to save at least the most important pieces of our times.

We must not surrender to the prevalent technical or art-political obstacles. Had at the turn of the last century courageous museum people not defied the current Zeitgeist there would be no Im- or Expressionists to be found in any of our museums. So lets spare us from the immanent questions of generations to come why we had not done anything against the loss of media arts.

The database that is being developed at the Humboldt University under your supervision in the Research Project on Virtual Art is already a substantial contribution.

This database can only be a first initiative to get an overview and to trigger discussions about which pieces to save in which way. Interfaces for example cannot simply be converted or emulated into a higher system. Here we need strategies of systematic preservation of hardware.
Which kind of problem solving there will be available in ten to twenty years is not yet foreseeable. Yet it is necessary to initiate now to do what is possible.

How was space suggested in the arts in the old days – how is space experienced today?

The revolution in the visualization of space was of course the "perspective", developed during the renaissance and the baroque, although there had also been attempts in the ancient world. In antiquity they achieved stupefying results not with mathematical methods, but through a series of tricks: as a result the Villa dei Misteri in Pompej or the Villa Livia near Rome still intrigue us. Later Panoramas industrialized the procedures of representation of space. Large immersive spaces brought remote places right into the metropolises of the 19th century. Sometimes their effects where so suggestive that the observer truly got into a state of delirium of perception...

These Panoramas were no durable medium of storage, they were too big, and they became damaged during transport – finally stored in the attics of the museums.
The famous Sedan-Panorama, for example, was burned during a bombing raid in the attic of the National Gallery. Those Panoramas had a similar problem with storage as computer art nowadays has. Towards the end of the 19th century it was the pictures of the cinema, which, though silent and black & white, where so impressive that their spectators at first panicked. A century later the cultural technique of interaction, though still shaky imaginary spaces of low resolution, created a new impression of artificial imaginary spaces. At the beginning of the nineties of the last century the hype surrounding these imagi-nary spaces was of such a magnitude in the worlds of entertainment, science and art that its repercussions are still in effect today.

Are there still any Panoramas today?

Yes, throughout the world roughly about 20. In Germany a depiction of the crucifixion at Altoetting to which people still are pilgrimaging. In Switzerland and Belgium there are a few more...

Many Panoramas like Panoramas with battle scenes have been used for propaganda purposes –

Right, surprisingly the Panorama was undergoing a remake as a propaganda format during the 60ies and 80ies of the last century. For example in the former Soviet Union, Egypt, North Korea, China, Bulgaria and the Iraq. Most common were battle scenes that depicted the myth of the creation of a nation and that legitimized and founded the regime. On the other hand the history of Panoramas had begun rather peacefully. At the beginning they only demonstrated artistic skill and deftness of technique. Depictions of Paris were shown in Paris and people where astonished. Increased usage of Panoramas brought new topics: exotic and unreachable landscapes, since tourism was scarcely developed. Spitsbergen Panorama in Paris, Englands colonies in London among others. Increasingly propagandistic tendencies emerged: battle scenes of the major wars…

The Panorama was the most advanced technique of illusionism at its time – before film, cinema and computer imagery. The most powerful medium, as we know from many statements from the time. Many sources testify that people became nauseous by viewing depictions of sceneries at sea; or battle scenes that appeared so suggestive that people expected to be trampled down by horses that where merely painted well.

Today we have become an extremely visual society. It requires a great deal to evoke a shocking experience. The threshold for immersion is rising higher and higher.

Right, it is incomparable to the simple suggestions that our ancestors were exposed to. Generally one might say: While establishing a new medium of illusion a discrepancy between imaginative power and conscious, reflective distance occurs. These differences come together again after continuous and conscious use. Adaption wears down the illusionistic powers, and very soon it looses its capability to captivate our consciousness. It finally becomes stale finding an audience blunted towards it's deceiving functions. Until finally a new medium with a higher sensory stimulus and more powerful potential of suggestion draws the spectator back into its spell. It is this mechanism, the competition between the media of illusion and the powers of rational distance, which manifests itself in the European history of the visual arts over and over again since mediaeval times.

It is worth at this point to commemorate the idea of Mimesis. Mimesis is a very old concept of the image, reaching far back into pre-civilization history. The German term Bild ("picture") originates from the old Germanic root "bil", and it still holds some of its etymological descent: It incorporated less a consciousness of the picture as such than indicated something that was in an intrinsic sense animate. It was an item containing a power of the irrational, of a magical and ghostly enchantment that could not be captured or controlled by a spectator.
If one understands the virtual not as a space of possibility but as a characteristic sphere of the imaginary; in an "as if" sense, it becomes clear that it is not about an aesthetic and conscious illusion – like the pleasure of mimetic reproduction – but rather about the temporary yet complete captivation of the consciousness.

The question is if increasingly realistic depiction and interaction is the final goal? If the threshold is pushed further and further, where does it go?

That is the question. Although the development of visual media – from the Lantera Magica show over Panorama, Stereoscope, Diorama, silent film, colour film and smell film, IMAX, Television until the virtual pictorial space of the computer – appears to be a history of machines in perpetual evolution. A change of modes of organization and materials that are continuously developed by the fascination of increasing the illusion. Yet I am skeptical if there will finally really be a medium of illusion that will be so seductive in its totality that we cannot resist.
The tendency is, and history has proofed it, to always top things. At the same time adaptation and conscious contact with new media increases media competence. That is one of the reasons why we should be very aware of the history of visual media. The more distanced our perception is, the more we are able evaluate and criticize the hype around new media.

Media art makes scientific processes illustratively comprehensiable?

This becomes increasingly apparent in the Artificial Life movement (A-Life) for example in the world of images created by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, Karl Sims or by Tom Ray. They appear to be a visual soundtrack for the most recent scientific theories of the biosciences.
Art visualizes the latest scientific theories, makes them negotiable and delivers them into the public discourse. Bioart provides highly visible icons for public discussions which otherwise would be much more abstract and alienated.

At the same time this produces a scientific propaganda emerges that enables rather shallow concepts with a suggestive, manipulative mediation to appear as concrete and animate. Collaborations among scientists and artist may be very fruitful. Artists, Leonardo da Vinci is a well known example, have often been scientists at the same time. Even nowadays there are more artists working at research laboratories than one might assume. Sometimes together with whole teams. Worldwide there are Artist in Residence programs, at the MIT or at IAMAS in Japan. Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss are good examples; both of them have tenure positions at the Fraunhofer Institute (Germany's most prominent research insitutute) and have established teams of up to twenty members.

Of course this has predecessors in the history of arts if one thinks of the big studios and workshops of the past centuries. This staff allows that some artists do not have to create the piece of art all by themselves. They have a variety of specialists available that collaborate like an orchestra. Communicative talents become more and more important and some great artists are virtuous in their ability of arranging individual competences and to think creatively in the sense of a collective work of art. Just like the director of a film has to guide a whole team of people to produce his final product, it is the same in interactive computer art where the increasing use of technology leads to more and more complex visual worlds that are not possible to achieve in any other way then through the communicative and organizational talent of the artist.
Perhaps this is related to the fact that many great names in the computer arts today are women. For example Christa Sommerer, Monika Fleischmann, Charlotte Davies.
A communicative talent could be responsible that a group is less organized in an authoritarian model than in a communicative and open situation. This enables people to give their full potential, that the incitations that arise are appreciated, picked up and creatively developed. Not only interconnected but truly developed in the creative process to finally achieve an orchestrated work.

A media artist is nowadays less a conceptionist, designer, programmer or manager in one person. In fact the media artist rather may be compared to a conductor.

Indeed, successful artist are generalists. They are able to produce their political, visual or aesthetical message through a good deal of communication and management. They have to connect many different issues to receive the maximum at many different places. The concept of the artist as individual seems to be outdated by media arts.
The Van Goghs or Gauguins of the computer age, working in complex worlds, would have difficulties creating large-scale interactive works. They might be able to exist and may visualize their ideas as long as they are not too complex, for complex concepts you need a whole team to develop all the integrated components of a complex work.

Even if there is a large team and the necessary economic background it still seems to be difficult to keep a level head so that there are comprehensible outcomes for the spectator. Would you agree that it is possible to evaluate interactive art by the way the user interface is designed and conceived?

This is in fact a key question how the interface is designed. For example how Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau have developed it in a way that their imaginative worlds are made accessible intuitively or if they appear to be rather hermetic so that they can hardly be grasped. At the same time interactive artworks hold the danger that natural interfaces let them appear to be even more suggestive and immersive. Artists like Knowbotic Research try to create a distance with their interfaces. From my point of view this kind of distance does justice to their artistic-political responsibility by creating a distance to their illusionary imaginative worlds, limiting their suggestive effects, and thus leaving space for abstraction and critical distance… for thinking space.
Therefore we could say that this process is two edged. On one hand it deserves that the interface is intuitive and becomes usable – on the other hand it becomes problematic as the newest suggestions may become too effective.

Christa Sommerer & Laurent Mignonneau
iamas.ac.jp/~christa/works/

Charlotte Davies
immersence.com

Monika Fleischmann & Wolfgang Strauss
netzspannung.org/mars

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Lozano-hemmer.com

Bernd Lintermann
bernd-lintermann.de/SonoMorphis/

Muench & Furukawa
http://hosting.zkm.de/wmuench/

Knowbotic Research
io.khm.de

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What in your opinion is the aim of media arts?

The aim of media art is not different from that which has always been the responsibility of art: The search for aesthetic, political and individual messages that touch people und help us to better understand the present. At the same time media arts, by its means of interaction, narrative processes or use of databases that support imaginative worlds, may give more expression than traditional art when skillful hands create it. An important responsibility of media arts nowadays is to create critical interfaces that allow the spectator to keep a certain distance that surrounds all the hype about virtual spaces and suggestive computer worlds.
On the one hand, there is the duty to explore the full media-potential for the aesthetics, which, by the way are far more complex than those of traditional artistic media. On the other hand not to let this process, this revolution of media in which we are currently situated, be leashed upon the spectator so that they are subjected to unmediated images and interactions. We have the responsibility to educate a critical, enlightened gaze to make this media revolution better comprehensible.

What do you think about "generative art" imaginative worlds that are created by the source code, where the artist does not know what is coming out at the end?

This is in fact one of the most fascinating phenomenona in computer arts. On one hand it is utilized for the visualization and propagation of scientific theories, for example in the debate about genetics – on the other hand it is a fascinating instrument that allows animation and enlivening through random processes. Imaginative worlds grow to unexpected results that depend only on a rough frame of selection that may be defined by the artist. In the sense of illusionism this may also lead to an additional effect of suggestiveness directing the work of art into unforeseeable directions.
Additionally they have an interesting effect on the concept of the artistic work, the "Werkbegriff", as such. Ironically suddenly the concept of the "original" returns back into the digital art, as each step in this process is a unique evolutionary development. For example Bernd Lintermanns work "Sonomorphis" offers ten powers of ten different possibilities of images. This means, to the artist, that there exists as many variations of the images as there are atoms in the universe.

Are there local differences in media arts despite globalization?

This is indeed a very exciting process: To observe the development of intercultural processes in media arts. That does not only account for East-West, but also for North-South. We have met amazing artist in Africa, South-America, Mexico, Southeast-Asia and even the Arctic's. They use media arts to contribute their local traditions into the worldwide exchange of images. By doing this they create interesting hybrid forms and art discourses – so that we end up where our conversation began: traveling.

Intercultural processes happen increasingly through media. This has positive as well as negative effects: on the one hand, telematics open up access into worlds of images that again open up new perspectives and insights. On the other hand, powerful structures like multinational corporations operating image databases, image industries like the globalised cinema industries monopolize images worldwide. This may lead to a monoculture of images, comparable to fast food that results in less variety and in a general leveling and an egalitarianism which thwarts creativity. This process follows economical interests and is unforeseeable.

When was the last time you consciously looked at the stars – when was the last time you dived into the starry sky?

The last time was at a wonderful feast on one of the hottest days of the last year. It was about 40 degrees and we where at a stately home outside of Berlin. We were dancing all night long, it was completely dark and there was a fantastic starry sky luminously bright… it was the night of my wedding.

Do you enjoy living in Berlin?

Very much so, though I am looking forward to research excursions and upcoming opportunities.

Thank you for this interview.

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