MACHINIMA IS NOT A GAME[1]

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GAME VIDEO/ART. A SURVEY provides stimulating insights into the broad range of practices, processes, and formations that have emerged as a result of technological innovation. Specifically, it documents the evolution of a game–based art form originating in 1996 and still developing, highlighting the often surprising connections between digital games, video art, and visual culture. This catalog and the accompanying exhibition pay homage to the transformative gestures of more than thirty artists who developed a new genre of audiovisual production. Rejecting a strict historical/chronological framework, *GAME VIDEO/ART. A SURVEY* focuses on one decade, showcasing significant works produced between 2006 and 2016 (more about the selection criteria below)[2].

Three milestones – 1996, 2006, 2016 – are particularly significant. In 1996, French curator Nicolas Bourriaud presented Miltos Manetas's *Miracle* (Fig. 1) at Basilico Gallery in New York in a group show titled *Joint Ventures*. Manetas recorded a few sequences from a flight simulator, *F/A 18 Hornet*, burned them on a DVD, and played them in a loop. The video depicts a fighter jet sliding on the water instead of sinking. The disarming simplicity of his gesture should not undermine its sheer brilliance. Manetas was among the first artists to recognize the importance of video games within the visual landscape. With this seemingly simple action, Manetas raised fundamental questions about the nature of representation, simulation, and authorship. But *Miracle* is not a Duchampian *readymade*, an *object–trouvé* or found footage because its production and presentation required a considerably transformative effort on the artist's part. Although the dominant interpretative and theoretical frameworks informing the history of machinima have often privileged narratives of technical prowess, the conceptual act of re–contextualizing game content is equally – *if not more* – important. Although dexterity in programming, hacking, and modding have played a crucial role in the development of this artform, the intellectual ingenuity of a gesture that transcends the often hermetic and asphyctic video game sphere should not be confused with the "de–skilling" approach discussed by critic

Benjamin Buchloh (2003). Manetas did not call *Miracle* "a machinima". Nor did Bourriaud. They could not. In fact, the term was coined only four years later. This explains why machinima is generally unacknowledged, *if not openly rejected*, within the Art World, where more generic terms like "video" or more recent iterations like "digital video", "HD video" or even "UHD video" are used. Such resistance should not come as a surprise: the mythopoesis of machinima alludes to practices of hacking and game fandom as far removed from the fine arts as one can possibly imagine. The early practitioners were more familiar with arcades than art galleries. But while machinima was (*is*) mostly confined to subcultures, in the past decade (2006–2016) the practice of making video art with games has blossomed.

Between 1996 and 2006, digital media have gone from the cultural fringe to the mainstream: the growth of the internet and the proliferation of mobile platforms such as laptops, tablets, new kinds of phones, and cheap, affordable game consoles has been staggering. This phenomenon mirrored the commercial introduction of inexpensive cameras in the second part of the 1960s, which gave pioneers or "early adopters" (an expression used by Everett M. Rogers in his influential 1962 study) like Nam June Paik and Andy Warhol new tools for artistic experimentation. Manetas's seminal series *Videos After Videogames* (1996–2002) – which he developed with a Sony PlayStation 2 – can be compared to Paik's works with the Sony Portapak, introduced on the market three decades earlier. Both artists conceived innovative ways of playing with images, turning consumer technologies into expressive tools. This should not come as a surprise. As Marshall McLuhan wrote in *Understanding Media. The Extension of Man* (1964), "Artists in various fields are always the first to discover how to enable one medium to use or to release the power of another." He also added that "The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of the changes in sense perception." When Paik died in 2006 – around the time Marisa Olson coined the expression "Postinternet" in a Rhizome panel (Connor, 2013) – a new generation of artists responded to an increasing technologically mediated environment in different ways. Machinima was one of them.

Game–based video art is both a process and a product identified by a prefix: "re". Re as in *again* or *anew*. Hence, *regeneration*. But also *recirculation, remix, re–cycle, re–creation, re–animation, re–enactment…* Artists working with machinima are committed to

interdisciplinarity and to the integration of a range of different media – subsumed under the rubric of the digital – into their practice. Machinima is thus related to such tactics as appropriation, manipulation, and subversion (e.g. *détournement, culture jamming)* of existing artifacts. Its status is paradoxical. On one hand, it is a *parasitic* form of expression: machinima would not exist without digital games, hence the definition of "derivative work" used in the context of copyright law. Additionally, it remediates media like film, video, photography but also drawing, painting, animation, simulation, computer graphics, and theatre. As such, it is unequivocally *recombinant* – yes, another "re".

At the same time, it is "something" else altogether. Machinima's reworking of videogame footage is interesting: it must maintain aspects of its original meaning and context as well as gather new meanings in new contexts. Additionally, if it is undeniable that machinima has been influenced, we must acknowledge its influence as well. For instance, one cannot underestimate the effects that this "unintended consequence" had on game design and game technology, from the inclusion of video editors (such is the case with the popular *Grand Theft Auto* and *The Sims* series) to the development of powerful capture game cards, from the DVR–like functions of modern consoles to online streaming platforms like Twitch.tv. But machinima did not simply contribute to the proliferation of game footage. Its relevance extends to the visualscape as a whole because it raises crucial issues pertaining to creativity, interdisciplinarity, new technologies, and intellectual property. For this reason, rather than providing a dogmatic and peremptory definition, in the context of the exhibition we chose to showcase the works into four thematic sections ("levels") corresponding to four key features of game–based video art: record, glitch, assemblage, and frame.

Each machinima is a *record*, that is a documentation of a performance or an experience, but – paraphrasing George Orwell – some machinima are more documentative than others. Consider, for instance, Joseph DeLappe's *dead–in–iraq for projection*, in which the artist writes the names of the U.S. soldiers who died in combat within the popular online simulation *America's Army* using the in–game chat system instead of "following the rules", i.e. play as expected. Or Hugo Arcier's *11 Executions*, which replays a series of senseless killings in various locales of *Grand Theft Auto V.* His work engages in a direct conversation with Alan Clarke's

infamous short film about sectarian murders in Northern Ireland, *Elephant* (1989), but also evokes the horror of recent terrorist attacks in Paris. Georgie Roxby Smith's *99 Problems [WASTED]* is the machinima equivalent of Dara Birnbaum's seminal *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978). Both videos challenge the representation of women in media by appropriating a fragment of popular culture (a videogame in the former case, a TV show in the latter) and repeating it until it becomes both mesmerizing and uncanny, amusing and unsettling, critically destabilizing their subjects. Larry Achiampong and David Blandy's *Finding Fanon 2* (2015) investigate the postcolonial condition within the simulated world of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Fig. 2). By recontextualizing the writings of Frantz Fanon, the artists created a multi–layered narrative which raises questions about the alleged "ideology–free" spaces of digital gaming. With *Elegia* (2015), Cuban artist Rewell Altunaga uses machinima to simulate the desperate journeys of the nameless migrants who drowned in the cruel waters of the Mediterranean in their attempts to reach the "promised land".

Machinima is "glitchy" both literally and metaphorically. The term itself is an error as it was originally meant to be spelled as *machinema*, a *portmanteau* of machine cinema. Additionally, machinima looks and sounds like a video game but does not behave as such. In fact, its producers removed the key feature of electronic play, that is, interactivity. Thus, machinima is a *broken game*, a game that does not work properly. And what is Manetas's *Miracle* – the mother of all machinima – if not a (*documentation of a*) found glitch?

Any machinima is also an assemblage, i.e. a work of art made by grouping together found or unrelated objects, different codes, aesthetics, narratives, and media. But then again some machinima explicitly and formally address this aspect. Consider for instance, *Post–Newtonianism* by Josh Bricker which juxtaposes a gruesome video shot by US soldiers on an helicopter disseminated online by Wikileaks to gameplay footage of a popular first–person shooter, *Call of Duty*, inviting the viewer to play a comparative game (Fig. 3). Or IP Yuk–Yiu's Hong Kong trilogy which references the medium of photography more than film or games. Kent Lambert's *RECKONING 3* culls images of Hollywood movies, television shows, and video games, creating an anthropological and performative exploration of the contemporary mediascape. Phil Solomon's take on a seminal work by Andy Warhol (*Empire*, 1964), is a

machinima remake set in Liberty City, itself a virtual replica of New York City. Tom Richardson' *The Author* is a video montage of stock photos, computer graphics, web pages, music, and narration. In this context, machinima is considered a digital collage. As such, it belongs to a long tradition which began more than a century ago with Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Collage is to the early 20C what machinima is to the early 21C.

Finally, machinima is inextricably linked to the notion of *frame*, which refers to the rigid structure that surrounds something, like a picture – including a *moving* picture. The term also refers to the single complete picture in a series forming a cinema, television or video film. Additionally, "frame rate" indicates the frequency at which an imaging device displays consecutive images called *frames*. Such expression applies equally to film and video cameras, computer graphics, video games, and motion capture systems. Last but not least, "to frame" means to express something, to give expression to. Two works in particular allude to the complexity of this notion: Claire Evans's *Modern Warfare* and Michiel Van Der Zanden's *Pwned Paintings #1* and *#2*. The former documents the systematic destruction of every television set and computer screen in the controversial "airport level" of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Fig. 4). The latter shows the systematic destruction of every painting hung on the walls of a museum and in the private homes of a quiet Italian village. As Anne Friedberg (2006) reminded us in her groundbreaking examination of the window as metaphor, as architectural component, and as an opening to the dematerialized reality we see on the screen, "*how* the world is framed has become as important as *what* is in the frame" (p. 5).

As *GAME VIDEO/ART. A SURVEY* illustrates, machinima's position within the field of visual culture is ambiguous, as it belongs simultaneously to different contexts, including contemporary art, experimental cinema, and game fandom. A practice once limited to a subculture has now become a global phenomenon, as a conjunction of interests coalesced around the idea of digital gaming as a space for visual experimentation. An increasing number of artists who do not necessarily associate with electronic entertainment – or even reject its overt and implicit ideologies – treat video games not to amuse, but as a resource that can be used, abused, and discarded. They question structures of surveillance and control; sex, gender, and class representation in media; political and/as personal issues; authorship and originality; memory and

loss; the utopian promises vs. the dystopian consequences of technology. From art schools to online forums, from video sharing sites to live streaming platforms, machinima is evolving both conceptually and aesthetically in unexpected, and therefore *interesting*, ways. Ultimately, *GAME VIDEO/ART. A SURVEY* is not simply a snapshot of contemporary tensions surrounding games, but a speculation about the potential futures of the art–technology nexus.

It implicitly asks: How will machinima look in 2026?

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Notes

1. This essay was published in Matteo Bittanti and Vincenzo Trione (Eds.), *GAME VIDEO/ART: A SURVEY*, Silvana Editoriale, Milano, 2016, pp. 38-45.

2. Not all the works included in this catalog and in the corresponding exhibition can be considered "pure machinima", some fully belong to the sphere of 3D computer animation. Nonetheless, all of them involve game technology, game aesthetics, and/or game tropes. In other words, machinima is often a place–holder to a set of practices like manipulation, appropriation, and emulation of game footage. As a notion and process, machinima contains different actions and intentions, but it not so broad that its meaning gets diluted to the point of uselessness.

References

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Figures

Fig. 1 Miltos Manetas, *Miracle*, 1996. Still frame from video installation

Fig. 2 Larry Achiampong and David Blandy, *Finding Fanon 2*, 2015. Still frame from video installation

Fig. 3. Josh Bricker, *Post Newtonianism*, 2010. Still frame from video installation

Fig 4. Claire Evans, *Modern Warfare*, 2010. Still frame from video installation