

Beate Geissler – Oliver Sann

Shooter, 2000-01

by Valentina Tanni

What happens to our bodies when our minds enter a virtual universe? *Shooter*, a work of art dedicated to the gaming world by German artists Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, could offer one possible answer. The project, which comprises a video and a series of photographs, is a record of a number of LAN parties (gatherings of groups of gamers who compete in the digital arenas of multi-player videogames, linked up by a local network) which the artists organized over a year and a half in their studio. The images focus on the faces of the players, shot against a neutral background by a camera directly facing them, relentlessly trained on them. For once the attention is not directed at the real heart of the action – the electronic world of the videogame – but what lies behind it, recording the physical repercussions of the events on-screen. The input is entirely digital, but the extremely high level of mental concentration required by the dynamics of the game provokes a physical reaction. Tension, sweat and agitation convey the adrenalin rush of the conflict in terms of body language: movements and facial expressions.

These physical movements replicate the moves taking place in the 3D space behind the screen, and the player's body becomes a conceptual extension of that of the avatar representing him or her, forging a bond between two universes which are only really distant in theoretical terms. The succession of shots of young men and women engaged in a very real battle for survival – death is an ever-present threat in the world of first-per-

son shooters – is a stunningly effective representation of the emotional and sensorial impact of the videogame experience. The spectator, observing the faces and expressions, can only guess at the type of combat, closely following the alternation of moves through the eyes of the player. Meanwhile the photographs capture gamers engaged in killing an opponent, whose avatar probably corresponds to the body of a person sitting just a few meters away.

Shooter deals with the delicate issue of relations between physical reality and intangible processes, certainly not a new field, but one which has come powerfully to the fore in the eyes of academics and artists, above all in the last decade, rekindled by the advent of cyberspace and virtual worlds.

One work which addresses this theme, with a vein of crude, subtly sadistic symbolism, is the famous *Painstation* (2001), a console which meets out a genuine physical punishment for each error committed (a burn, whiplash or electric shock). The project, created by another German duo, Tilman Reiff and Volker Morawe of the Fur collective, elicited quite an outcry in view of its undoubtedly radical nature, but what it was really attempting to do was reintroduce the issue of the physical world into the arena of digital entertainment. This aspect is often underestimated, in favour of a stereotyped vision based on an over-simplified contraposition between "real" and "virtual" experiences, where the latter is often viewed as something artificial, or even fake.

Another interesting implication of *Shooter* lies in its ability to portray a generation, the gaming generation, which has only recently begun to capture the interest of the media (which usually dishes out the same cliché-filled descriptions, with a little lambasting on the side) and that of the creative universes of art, literature and film, as well as psychological and sociological studies. The world of the LAN party demonstrates the socializing potential of videogames and is just one of the intrinsically community-based expressions of the medium, one aspect which is often ignored or played down in favor of the more publicized negative side-effects (aggression, sociopathy and addiction).

(English translation by Anna Carruthers)

Link: www.lifeisgood.biz/shooter

Biography

Beate Geissler was born in Neuendettelsau, Germany, in 1970. She studied photography at the Staatliche Fachakademie für Fotodesign in Munich and then attended the Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung, in Karlsruhe, studying under Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer and Gunther Rambow.

Oliver Sann was born in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1968; he started working as a photography assistant for Hugh Ashley Rayner in Bath, Great Britain, then attended the Staatliche Fachakademie für Fotodesign in Munich studying photography. He graduated at the Academy for Media Arts in Cologne.

They both live and work in Cologne, Germany. Their work has been on display in galleries and museums since the mid-nineties. Their most recent work is the video *Return to Veste Rosenberg* which encourages one to imagine various fantasy adventures in the mediaeval fortress.





