The Electronistas by Chris Moore

The historian Eric Hobsbawm observes in his book, "*The Age of Extremes*", that the 20th Century was short, from 1914-1991, and that to everyone's surprise, the end of the Cold War heralded what now appears to be an age of political uncertainty. It was also coincidentally the beginning of the information revolution. In the brief period since 1991 societies everywhere have been transformed by the Internet, mass communication, cheap computers, and individual choice. Net surfing, iPods, blogging, YouTube and FaceBook are now banal, and at the same time Electronic art has begun to coalesce into something identifiably specific and utterly fascinating.

Let's take a moment to look at an example of the species from 1991. Tatuso Miyajima's "*Region no 126701 – 127000*" is a vast and mesmerizing work. It comprises three hundred LED panels, red or green, each one counting independently at different speeds 1 to 100. While repetition of the exact sequence is possible, it is highly unlikely: its appearance is in constant flux. Whilst it recalls numberless electronic counting systems and statistical information, here, both systems and statistics are irrelevant. The work refers to nothing other than itself, its random ticking. It is counting for the love of it. It is we who give it meaning, as something that reminds us of time, people, life and death, commerce and stupendous or monstrous statistics of every kind.

Given the information revolution which was to follow, Miyajima's work appears prescient, even if he himself was primarily concerned with Buddhist beliefs regarding the interconnectedness of things. Knowing what we do now about information, how it is stored and can be used or abused, anyone standing in front of this colossal work cannot help but be overawed and somewhat terrified by it. Jonathon Swift's ironic and iconic criticism of eighteenth century English politics has been mostly reduced to a charming fable, of which we mostly have only a cartoon recollection about the miniscule Lilliputians futile attempt to tie Gulliver down. Like all fables, we are free to adopt and manipulate them to our own age and Gulliver's gormless travels are an apt doppelganger for our own: disturbingly similar. Ours is also an age of new freedoms mixed with absurd governance; sublime gigantisms with atomic detail; rational liberality with robotic violence or godlike biology with religious romance. In the age of mass information, Gulliver's worlds appear to be colliding with our own. Electronic art provides a Swift antidote: humor, black and whimsical.

Electronic Art has come a long way since 1991, shadowing technology's every development. The intellectual concerns, if now more refined, remain much the same. Its biggest problem absurdly is also its most trivial: its name – what does it mean? The precursors of Electronic Art are themselves to greater or lesser degrees electronic artists: Nam Jun Paik (televisions), Joseph Beuys (sound), Bruce Nauman (film), Donald Judd (neon lighting), Rebecca Horn and Jenny Holzer (installations). But it begs a question of definition - are Horn and Holzer electronic artists or just artists who use electronics in their work? - Undoubtedly both. All of which does not help us to come closer to understanding what the term means or whether it is even useful. Furthermore, any art can incorporate electronic elements - lighting, film, sound and a multitude of other props - without it necessarily warranting the specific description of electronic art. Christophe Demaître's combinations of anachronistic photographic methods with electronic ephemera directly challenge such categorization. It is pointless separating talk of electronic bits of an installation (computers, diodes, switches, movement sensors, screens and amplifiers) from its non-electronic paraphernalia (furniture, photographs, personal effects, handwriting).

Nonetheless, in the context of contemporary art today there is something called electronic art and it has obtained a specific character. To say this is not to be prescriptive but recognizes that culturally and artistically diverse artists are developing works which incorporate electronic mediums in such a fundamental way, affecting how we understand experience itself, that it deserves special consideration. Fundamental because the very electronic nature of the work is central to how it is interpreted. It defines the meaning of the

work and the work's meaning as art. The term itself is clunky and bland. For want of something better though and given a growing default acceptance (as opposed, for instance, to "*digital"* or "*kinetic art"* – equally characterless and circumscribed), let us also adopt the non-judgmental moniker of Electronic Art.

These works are not radical departures from their ancestors but they distill more concisely numerous explorations which have evolved from conceptual and minimalist art. One is collaboration. It is the nature of much art now, particularly conceptual art, that in order to be realized it requires a team of artists, photographers, and film-makers, as well as electrical, structural, lighting and sound engineers. This has meant a shift from the position where the artist presides as an omnipotent and lonely seer to one of collaborative enterprises between diverse talents, of which filmmaking is the obvious precedent. Works such as the most baroque of Matthew Barney's require enormous logistics and cooperation. Although the artist plays many roles, among them scriptwriter, director, producer and impresario, in order for it to come into being the work still requires cohorts of assistants.

Out of collaboration comes a collaborative philosophy or at least a direction. And here it is interesting to survey the common themes arising in much electronic art of the present. Taking a sweeping generalization – really the best sort! – what informs almost all electronic art now is a struggle, sometimes overt but mostly ambiguous, between paranoia and freedom, fear and humour. This duality is captured beautifully by the whimsical island6Lab work "*Phone Bomb"* that plays on both our technophobia and technophilia. In sequence, the artists appear in a field, waiting for something, bored, expressionless, moronic. Subtitles invite the viewer to call a phone number, just like in telemarketing. Upon doing so the artist's mobile start ringing, but when he answers it – shock! – his head explodes, blood and cranium splattering everywhere, literally dy(e)ing for his art. Funny, crass, and horror-movie stupid, what touches us most is that we caused this manslaughter, and we giggled. When we repeat it, and we do because you just can't help yourself, it's murder.

The duality arises out of an ecstatic love of technology, the tone of which is a sense of dehumanization and alienation, however illusory – as illusory as a technological panacea. But in a world of "*Warcrafts"* and "*Second Lifes"*, what is reality anyway? New technology is sometimes demonized as Frankenstein, Hal or Aliens, but it is also a cocoon we withdraw into to emerge in the ethereal world of cyberspace as clichéd warrior butterflies. It's definitely weird, so what else is there to do but laugh? Transmogrification however is not transfiguration. There is always the risk that we will wake up as electronic beetles left lying on our backs by an uninterested world.

Do we use the information or succumb to it? Such Manichean choices seem tedious, so we flip-flop between them. The sheer boredom is important though. The realities of everyday life involve a lot of it – office work, traffic jams, supermarkets – not necessarily always disagreeable but certainly repetitive. Our technological world's consumerist dynamism, including political ideas, has as much to do with constant boredom as unsatisfied desire. Much of our economic success has less to do with a striving for improvement than a need for distraction. Martin Amis has written of the boredom inherent in a totalitarian state but in the world of freedom we have chosen to be bored. This is why pornography, one of the champions of the information age, is so successful: precisely because it fails to satisfy, not because it does. The masculine "pepper-grinders" in the lower half of Duchamp's "*Big Glass"* understand this. With unlimited entertainment available and effort saving devices at hand, not least the remote control and mobile phone, the paranoia and ecstasy we find in technology is often treated lackadaisically. The promise, expectation and satisfaction never quite measure up. So we see ourselves when we stumble across Kristof Kintera's "*I am sick of it all!"* (2003). It comprises a plastic shopping bag full of groceries slumped on the floor sighing and complaining and shrugging its weight. We know what he means.

But, there is an *out*. To be ambiguous is to be subversive; and uncertainty is a challenge, one which artists love. This is not a case of relativism but of disruption and disruptiveness.

The answer to ennui is action! But what sort? Interaction is a logical extension of the original minimalist experience, one where anthropomorphic scale was the passive reminder to the viewer that not only were they participating in the work by looking at it, but in fact that they were its necessary compliment. With electronic art we see minimalism and conceptualism swapping ground. Take Rose Tang's diode buildings whose height depends on that of the viewer or Yang Longhai's "*Kiss me!*" lips, whose call-girl entreaties, when you succumb to them, suddenly switch to a disgusted figure hastily backing away. A more personal example occurs with Wang Dongma's / island6's interactive mirrors, which spring to life upon being approached, displaying a girl combing her hair or, with a nod to Dadaism, male and female dressing tables complaining respectively about "*his*" wants and "*her*" needs (there is also a third dressing table which complains in Chinese about the pretentious pair of foreigners). It is such interactive qualities that are helping to define a specifically "electronic" sensibility.

There is an important distinction to be noted here between interactive art, which engages with the viewer directly, and purely kinetic art, which, although it often incorporates electronic aspects, operates independently of the viewer (think of Alexander Calder and the Russian Constructivists). One is not necessarily better than the other. However, while kinetic art performs to the viewer who only engages with the work passively, at most reactively, the other actually co-opts the viewer spontaneously, like a conjurer or anarchist. Thus the Czech, Kristof Kintera's kinetic sculptures, which relate very well to Wang Dongma's pieces, or vice versa, tend to have an independent existence. His teenager violently beating his head against a wall at Art Basel 2006 ("*Revolutio"n*) must have shredded the nerves of everyone in the neighboring booths. But he would keep banging away regardless of what anyone nearby was doing (which is of course partly its point). By contrast Wang Dongma's *Red Veil* only half exists if the viewer refuses to participate by stepping up close enough to trigger the film of a red-veiled woman who emerges behind the surface of an antiquated mirror, questioning your subjectivity. Another example which falls halfway between the two is Jean-Francois Cantin's "*Inner City*". Here an LED display sits snuggly at the square base of an elegant shoulder-high vitrine. The colorful LED shows a dual conveyor diagonal to the base sided by revolving quarters of cogs. It is a beautiful work, but only when one stands close to it gazing through its (glass) ceiling, crystal ball like, is it fully revealed. The glass walls reflect the LED image out infinitely, beyond the perceived space of the vitrine, engulfing precisely the space you occupy yourself. It is an industrial disco-floor of infinite highways and glowing machines, and you stand in the middle of this mosaic of light and you are simultaneously seduced and trapped.

With recent electronic art the viewer is not only participating in the art works, becoming part of them, but can be even be seen as an agent of the artists themselves, either random or controlled. In a sense it has always been so, but these artists force us to concentrate, we are not allowed to casually ignore or dismiss what is going on: the mix is too unsettling and too close to the bone. This is why electronic art of the information age, even at this early stage of its development, is so engrossing. It takes our obsessions with technology, human fears and playfulness, and reflects them back at us using the very instruments which distract and bore us, terrify and charm us, and bring us to a feeling of childish covetousness and cupidity. Its jokes are not just a wry grin but a violent poke in the ribs.

Addendum

I was invited to write this essay by island6, one of preeminent supporters of electronic art through its production, exhibition and promotion. The rhythm of life at island6 is one of the stage: there is endless practice and performance. Artists come from all over the world to collaborate, often reflecting the cross-over between Western and Chinese art, one inherent in island6's home for the past few years in Shanghai. There are no preconditions: the workshop is always open to experimentation, cultural collisions, and artistic interactions. Indeed, that many works are constructed, re-built, and refined in the very space in which they will be exhibited adds greatly to their style, both arising out of and adapting to their specific environment. The sense of freedom is great and the work ethic exhausting. The main reason

it is successful though is that island6 makes great art, whether electronic or otherwise. It is this commitment that makes it so successful and such a vital player in Shanghai's art scene.

Bibliography /Credits

- Wang Dongma, "*What he wants*" (2008), *What she needs* (2008), *Foreign Language* (2008), mirrors, LCD screens, media players; text by Tom Lee Pettersen, sound by Manels Favre, technical realization by Yang Longhai and island6Lab
- Wang Dongma, "*Hong Lou Meng" (The Red Veil)* (2008), mirror, LCD screen, technical realization by Yang Longhai and island6Lab
- Krištof Kintera, "*Revolution"* (2005), electromechanical system, microchip controller, metal construction, polyurethane, clothes
- Krištof Kintera, "*I am sick of it all"* (2003), sound, electromechanical instrument, groceries (cucumber, packets of potato crisps), plastic shopping bag
- Tatsuyo Miyajima, "*Region no 126701 – 12700, 1991"*, light emitting diode, IC electric wire and aluminium panel, 300 units, 190x1200cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales

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