Globalization, art and the art system

Maurizio Bolognini

The author's research interests are: art, technology and democracy. On this latter subject he has published several essays and a book entitled Democrazia elettronica *(Carocci, Rome, 2001). As an artist he has worked with digital technologies since the 1980s. One of his best-known works is* Computer sigillati *(Sealed Computers, 1992): more than 200 machines which are programmed to produce flows of random images and then left to work indefinitely, usually without monitors. His works have been exhibited widely in Europe and the USA. He has put on shows, presentations and performances in Paris, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sydney. His latest one-man shows include: Museo Laboratorio di Arte Contemporanea (Rome, 2003), Williamsburg Art & Historical Center (New York, 2003), Museo di Arte Contemporanea Villa Croce (Genoa, 2005). Latest books on his work: D. Scudero (ed.),* Maurizio Bolognini: Installazioni, disegni, azioni *(on/off line), (Lithos, 2003); and S. Solimano (ed.),* Maurizio Bolognini: Infinity out of Control *(Neos, 2005). The text that follows was made available to the participants of the international symposion on "Globalization and Local Identity," organized jointly by the World Society for Ekistics and the University of Shiga Prefecture in Hikone, Japan, 19-24 September, 2005, which the author was finally unable to attend.*

Foreword

This paper follows the form of an interview: Five questions are raised on major issues regarding the theme of the paper, and replies are based on the direct experience relating to the author's art work.

Replies to five major questions

• What is the relationship between the globalization of art and local identities? Is it possible to analyze the globalization of art as a process of the cultural integration of different identities?

It is clear that the influence of the processes of globalization is not limited to economic and technological aspects but also has to do with culture and the deep-seated dimension of local identities. However, it would be reductive to look at the thematics of globalization of art as a phenomenon belonging only to the cultural sphere. In the first place this is because it is not possible to speak of the meaning of local/global identity in art without taking into account the *art system*, that is, the apparatus (galleries, museums, Kunsthallen, auction houses, collectors, publishers, etc.) which integrates the cultural and economic dimensions. It is also because cosmopolitism has always been in the DNA of art, but this has not prevented the history of the art from having its center (also within the West itself) in the economically most developed countries.

Art galleries are focusing increasing interest on these thematics but, if we exclude the movement connected to the new technologies, which are at the heart of the globalization processes, they do not seem to be proposing anything innovative. Some galleries put on exhibitions about the presumed effects of globalization, but in many cases this simply amounts to putting together artists who would be the same in all other respects were it not for the place of birth indicated on their passports. In other cases they use the themes of anti-globalization against so-called McDonald's or Disneyland model in art, but do so in the very same galleries where in the other months of the year these models are practiced with profit, thus demonstrating that there is no difference.

So all this should not be taken too seriously. But there are two phenomena which deserve to be considered with interest:

- the globalization of the art system according to a mostly Anglo-American and European model, and the possibility that circuits of authentically intercultural exchange may open up on the margins of this model; and,
- the use of information and communication technologies by the same artists, which opens up new possibilities of development and gives globalization a more concrete, operative perspective.

• Why should we maintain that the globalization of art is developing according to an Anglo-American and European model if more and more frequently exhibitions include artists coming from Third World countries?

The internationalization of art has very rarely been studied for what it is and without the rhetoric that belongs to ecumenism or to the global and, more recently, anti-global dimension. It is only a very limited part of the economic and cultural expansion of the West, which has been based more on the cooptation and integration of some artists and groups of artists from the Third World and Eastern Europe than on a real opening up to other cultural situations. Since the 1990s this tendency has also served to provide new fuel and to restore legitimacy to a system that was running on empty. My impression is that the idea has never (or not yet) been to integrate the artistic production of various cultural contexts, but more simply to give visibility, in the West, to some artists coming from previously excluded countries.

Naturally, as always, the best and the worst intentions have got mixed up, both in the case of big exhibitions and in the commercial circuit. At the 1999 Venice Biennale, Harald Szeemann brought artists from the People's Republic of China from P.S. 1 in New York, and then there was Documenta 11 in 2002. Since then art galleries have given increasing space to artists from South-East Asia, Africa and Latin America. Particular attention has been placed on second- or third-generation immigrant artists resident in Europe in relation to the problems of the cultural integration of their ethnic groups. And perhaps this is the most interesting case; people have started to talk (using a term coined

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by Ronald Robertson in 1995) about "glocal" artistic scenes as a way of pointing to the co-existence of a global and a "local" dimension, which, however, in this case assumes a totally virtual and de-territorialized character. If we exclude second- and third-generation immigrants, these artists have often been selected according to criteria tending to separate the work from its original context (always assuming that this is still a prominent feature in the work), without calling into question the structure of the system of western art. Moreover this has meshed with the recently acquired centrality of the figure of the curator, which tends to favor the choice of sufficiently flexible artists and sufficiently indeterminate works. As a result, all this could easily seem to be a process of the cloning of western art.

People will say that the visual arts are not comparable with the standardized products of the cultural industry like the cinema and music, that they are a separate chapter in the process of cultural globalization, and that therefore the risks of the westernization of non-western art are lower. But the data clearly indicate what the power relations are that define the situation. Kusin & Company have estimated the value of the sales of artistic assets in the world (2001) at 27 billion euros, 92 percent (25 billion) of which is concentrated on the two sides of the Atlantic. Half of this (12.5 billion) is in the United States, 7 billion in the United Kingdom and 2 billion in France. In Italy (a rather peripheral country in the western art system, but where the maximum concentration of artistic assets is to be found), the volume of sales is estimated at around 400 million, which is equivalent to the Italian turnover of Microsoft. It is also useful to bear in mind that 80 percent of global activity is carried out by 4,000 operators (dealers and auction houses) present in Europe and the United States. As far as I know, the figures for contemporary art alone are not known, but I expect their distribution to be even more uneven.

This is sufficient to give a picture of the situation and to help us understand which countries might be in a position to determine the direction of development: the importance of artists and their international careers, even given the many factors of chance, correlate with the economic weight of their countries, the prestige of their artistic and cultural institutions, the size of their private and public collections. Therefore it is not realistic to think that there is much space outside the center. Certainly in the great exhibitions one can now find artists from the Ukraine and Angola (Ilya Kabakov or Fernando Alvim, to name two examples) and also some Chinese artists of the generation following the Cultural Revolution (such as Chen Zen and Huang Yong Ping), but they remain exceptions and change nothing in the hierarchies of the art system and in the way in which these are reflected in the narrative known as the history of the art.

To sum up: everything tells us that the globalization of the art coincides with the expansion of Western countries and the reproduction of their inner hierarchies. Then there is another aspect to consider: beyond being controlled by Western operators and institutions, the art system has characteristics that can objectively prevent other directions of development. For example, the galleries themselves, the exhibition spaces are the product of the history of western art. At an Ekistics convention it is not inappropriate to emphasize that also the characteristics of the exhibition space can condition these processes: it is true, public art and other experiments do exist, but the aseptic, modernist gallery is still the main reference point for everyone.

• Your work Museophagia Planet Tour (1998-99) involved a great number of art galleries located in different continents. What relationship is there with these tendencies? And what is your view of the possibilities of real globalization?

The Museophagia Planet Tour (MPT) was a performance which involved various art galleries. In 1998 I removed all the objects (furniture, telephones, etc.) present in an Italian art gallery, thereby devastating the exhibition space. I then went on a kind of world tour and repeated this action in galleries in various cities – Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Sydney, Papeete, Bangkok, and elsewhere (fig. 1). In each of these galleries I removed furniture and objects, accumulating them in one travelling collection and transporting them from one gallery to another and one continent to another (fig. 2). This work was not about the globalization process in the art system, although it took it as a background. Through this work I tried to produce an almost satellite vision of the exhibition system. Derrick de Kerckhove has talked about this work by making reference also to the possible consumption of art galleries through digitalization.

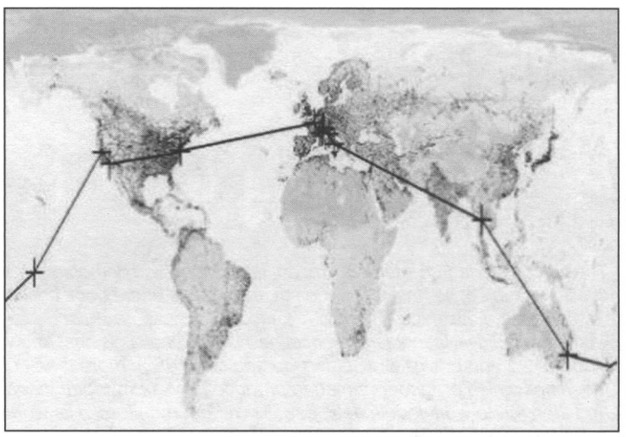

Fig. 1: Maurizio Bolognini, Museophagia Planet Tour, 1998-99.
Note: This performance involved art galleries in various cities (Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Sydney, Papeete, Bangkok, etc.) in a circular action based on the removal of objects (furniture, telephones, fixtures) which were then transported from one gallery to another and from one continent to another.

The galleries that I recall with most interest are of course those to be found in more out-of-the-way places. For example, the About Studio, which in 1999 was located at the edges of Bangkok's Chinatown. On the first floor was the gallery, on the ground floor there was a bar, the About Cafè, which during the day was deserted but in the evening was packed with all types of interesting people. Downstairs, the furnishing mixed a wide range of styles but upstairs the exhibition space was perfectly empty, white, aseptic, just what one would expect in a gallery. The curators of the gallery were already posing the problem of local identity, but they realized that local and global can be abstract categories, and that, in particular in art, the local dimension can become reductive, overwhelming. Another interesting gallery, also in Bangkok, was Visual Dhamma, which however worked on a smaller scale and was run by a European.

In Papeete (60,000 inhabitants in the middle of the Pacific), the galleries were all commercial, aimed at tourists with modest expectations. The Musée Gauguin, still run by the French Ministry of Culture, was a few kilometers away. However, it was so hidden by the vegetation that it was almost as if it were not there.

In Sydney the situation seemed to me interesting and worthy of being studied in detail. Here, at the end of the 1990s, the galleries that exhibited works by aboriginal artists (not only the traces of Songlines but, for example, large canvases depicting Cook's sailors as they disembarked on the Australian coast immersed in a sinister light) seemed completely separate from the galleries of "international" art, and even occupied different districts. As I covered kilometers on foot, I had the impression of a true, involuntary apartheid. The Gitte Weis Gallery, which par-

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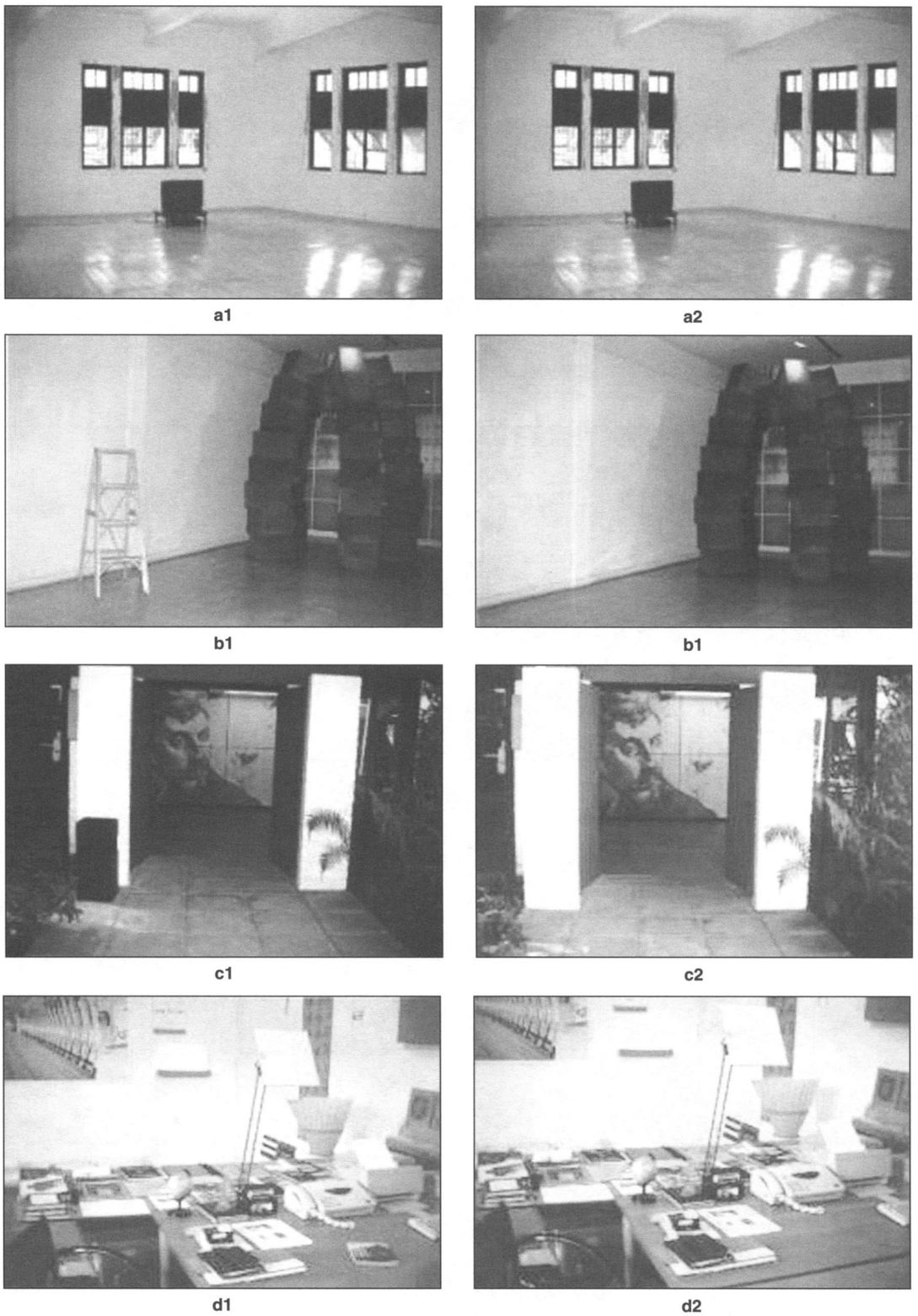

Note: a1 and a2: Museophagia: About Studio, Bangkok 1999;
b1 and b2: Museophagia: Visual Dhamma, Bangkok 1999;
c1 and c2: Museophagia: Musée Gauguin, Papeari, Tahiti 1999;
d1 and d2: Museophagia: Gitte Weis Gallery, Sydney 1999.

Fig. 2: Maurizio Bolognini, Museophagia Planet Tour, 1998-1999.

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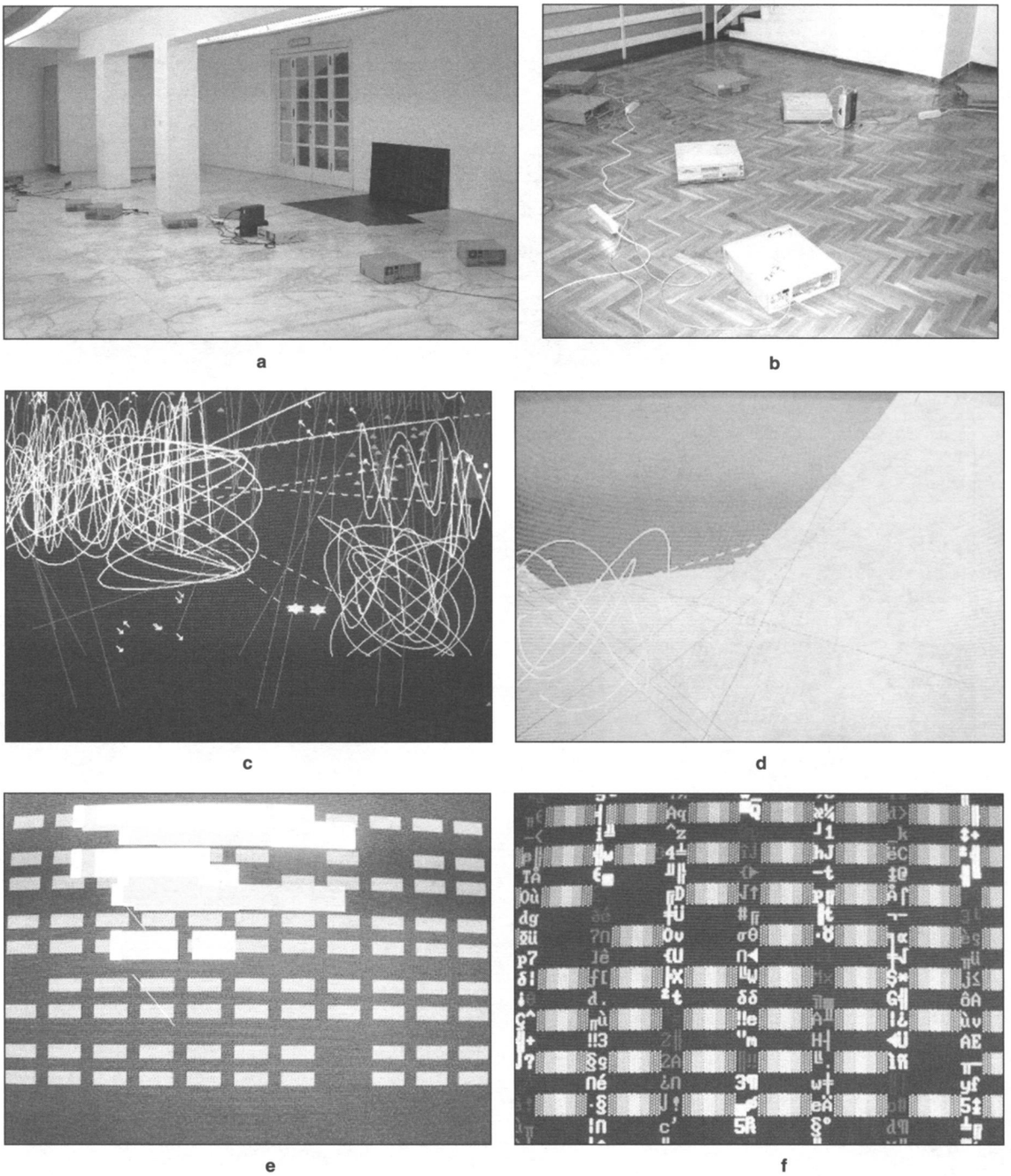

Note: a and b: IMs (Imaging Machines) and *Computer sigillati* are machines (more than 200 since 1988) which I programmed to produce unlimited flows of random images and then I left them to work indefinitely.
c and d: In the Atlas 2 series the modification of some codes from these was delegated to non-artist programmers (the codes went from one to another in an uncontrolled way: participation was open, and the only condition was that the endless continuity of the flow of images be maintained). An evolution is evident in the images b and c, produced through codes modified in Bangalore.
Images e and f, also characterized by a bottom-to-top flow, represent a different path of development that in this case had its origin in Russia and Switzerland.

Fig. 3: Maurizio Bolognini, Atlas 2, 2001-2004.

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ticipated in my performance, was one of these international galleries. It was located in a large building whose history was bound up with the struggle for the emancipation of women: I ask myself what would have happened if one or two galleries of the other kind (those with pictures of Cook's sailors) had moved into that building. Probably they would not have been able to live together. In its post-modern version, art has partly abandoned the spirit of avant-garde (which implied opposition against all other art practices), but the art system continues to emphasize differences, because it needs to present its objects as means of distinction for collectors.

• You mean that what we call international art is still a western phenomenon, and that in order to render it global, certain conditions need to be overcome. How do you see the future of the globalization of art?

What I am trying to say is that perhaps there is no point in speaking about art in all its manifestations. What is art outside what we call the history of the art? And what relationship is there between this history and the other expressions that would have to converge in an effective process of globalization? If I mention aspects of urban geography, I do so in order to emphasize that these continue to exist, in contrast to the planetary dimension of the processes of which we speak and to the implosion of cultures produced by the new communication technologies. At a convention of Ekistics held in Japan, I would also like to point out that nobody has ever systematically studied the characteristics of exhibition spaces by applying the notions of Ekistics that define locality (genius loci, fudo, landmarks ...). Nor – if we exclude the revitalization of West Chelsea in New York, which involved many galleries moving from Soho in the 1980s – does it seem to me that there have ever been systematic studies of the alternations and migrations of galleries in urban space which distinguish between various characteristics and affiliations, as are carried out with regard to other commercial activities.

As for the conditions and the outcomes of the globalization process, if art and its system could be separated, we could speak about the potential of the former and the limitations of the latter.

I have few illusions about the system of art: it is difficult to believe that the capitalistic machine will suddenly become innocent when it is applied to culture. And contemporary art, even though it is not an important sector economically speaking, still remains at the center of concrete economic relations. I continue to think, however, that art is a field of experimentation and research that has extraordinary potential.

It is still impossible to say what will happen, but I like to think that the game – although played on a playing field that is not exactly level – is still open.

This is why I do not wonder how many non-American and non-European artists will be in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) collections in 10 years' time, but rather what we will find, for example, in the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, which declares its intention to take into account the globalization of art without taking Western art as the only paradigm, comparing the character of Chinese and Western art. We will see if this will open up a different perspective, or if it will be like forcing dissimilar things to live together. The game of art, on the other hand, is played above all on the terrain of digital technologies and depends on the fact that artists want globalization because they are interested in establishing relations.

• Digital technologies have opened up new possibilities of communication and given greater concreteness to the perspectives of globalization. But to associate these technologies with the globalization of art suggests the techniques of sampling, hybridization, collage ... Is this the globalization of art that we should expect?

I can only hope that it is more than that. Art connected to digital technologies goes beyond sampling and hybridization, which in any case today have many supporters also outside the new technologies. The idea of artists as DJs of culture, dedicated to sampling, continuously mixing and reworking what there is, has been popular for some years, ever since some curators began to consider the history of the art as a completed evolutionary process.

In this perspective, art, its history, its branding, are less connected to the vertical dimension (the chronology of art) and more to the horizontal dimension (relations with other disciplines, other existential and cultural situations). This fits in very well with the possibilities of continuous recombination offered by digital technologies, thanks to which all content is always convertible and readily to hand. But the contribution of digital technologies to artistic research is not exhausted in the hybridization and recombination of what exists. In my work, which is based on the apparent self-reduction of the role of the artist, it is the machines that are given the task of constantly re-working the content, constructing parallel information universes. My point of departure is the delegation of work to the machine. I have programmed my machines (Imaging Machines, Sealed Computers, Atlas 2, CIMs, etc, hundreds since the end of the 1980s) to produce inexhaustible flows of random images, leaving them then to work indefinitely. In the Atlas 2 series (fig. 3) I have allowed non-artist programmers from all over the world to modify the software I used to program some of these machines. The code passed from one to the other in an open and uncontrolled way, and the only condition that had to be met was the maintenance of continuity and the inexhaustibility of the flows of images produced.

I would not know how to consider these works outside the cultural context in which they arose. Art is a clearing-house in which all experimentation must be pushed to the extreme. And this does not happen when the premises are relativism, sampling and collage. I have never been interested in the hybridization of content, but rather in the hybridization of devices, media and technological forms. If I want to mix the content I delegate the task to a machine, and this moves the meaning of the operation onto a different plane from that of multiculturalism. But I have no recipes.

Conclusion

When I consider the globalization of art, I can only think that it is of little use if instead of exploiting differences it tends to cancel them out, that the complexity of the general picture should not be lost to view, that on the contrary its weight should be borne, avoiding that relativism becomes the negation of diversity, bringing positions closer together without levelling them, expanding the number of voices able to express themselves. Finally, it seems to me a problem of authenticity and democracy. Otherwise the claim for the universality of art and the idea of exporting it or importing it are empty formulas.

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