

# HELLO WORLD!

Digital art is no longer a fashion or a trend. Long kept far away from the rarified world of contemporary art, its institutions and even the market itself, digital art is now spreading everywhere, online and off.

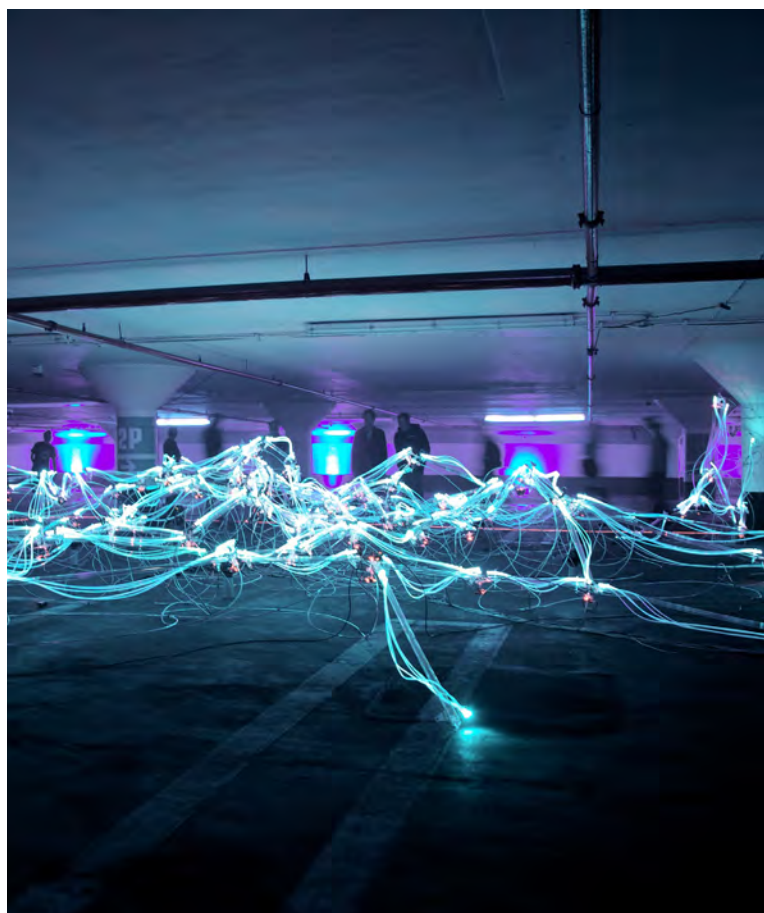
Settling on name for a genre that encompasses many methodologies and permutations, but doesn't quite meet any narrow definition completely can be quite a challenge. Digital art has exactly this problem... or is it computer art, or Internet art, or tech art, or new media, etc.? It is impossible to grasp entirely what emerges from this field. There are difficulties in classification, appreciation, ideological parameters, especially when porosity has clearly triumphed. Some, such as Norbert Hillaire, tend to say that (almost) any work created in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from its conception to its production, from its diffusion to its exhibition, has seen some form of digital manipulation. There is no digital art in the absolute, but a degree of digital in contemporary art. Others, such as the critic and curator Dominique Moulon, point to the inertia of a divide, which has seen digital art develop in circles of legitimacy that were not the same as those of contemporary art... including the Ars Electronica festival (Linz), Peter Weibel's ZKM (Karlsruhe) or the Cube (Issy-les-Moulineaux) or Gilles Alvarez's Biennale Nemo, in Ile de France, and many other festivals. When discussing the subject, we often find a kind of tension between the desire to build a discourse on the phenomenon, even to promote it, but needing to isolate it, and to promote its technical nature, as an object of its own. To truly overcome considering digital art as an isolated region, and weigh it as art itself, the genre must look beyond its label and no longer analyze it through the prism of technology, but through aesthetics.

It is important to remind ourselves that for Mongrel, Vuk Ćosić, and others from net.art, the idea of using the Internet for artistic purposes was precisely inspired by the idea of bypassing institutions. Today, the momentum carries in the opposite direction. Digital art is entering the museum, and the market is making an effort to monetize what was originally not intended to be monetized.

## The public is ready

The past year has been an interesting one for the digital arts. Many exhibitions on the subject or related fields were opened, and according to some, a it was consecration of sorts into the hallowed ground of institutional acceptance. Co-directed by Ircam and the Centre Pompidou, "Coding the World" revisited the very recent history of the links between the code and the arts. Computer art pioneer Herbert Franke was with Iannis Xenakis, and Ryoji Ikeda from the Japanese crew Dumb... sharp selection that also looked at the sector of musical creation. In Boston, "L'art à l'ère d'Internet, 1989 à Aujourd'hui" noted how the Internet has radically changed the field of art, particularly in its production, distribution and reception. The Post-Internet generation was well represented there, and it is true that the intuition of its creators, Marisa Olson, Gene McHugh or Artie Vierkant – to see in the Internet a historical and cultural conditioning rather than an information exchange of technology – is verified day by day. The web is no longer considered as a vast forum for teenagers and nerds, as it was in the 1990s, but as the new pop culture, from YouTube to memes.

Photo Marius Masalar



This year, we also saw some notable monographs, such as that of LaM dedicated to Nicolas Schöffer, teamLab at the Grande Halle de La Villette, and a solo show by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer at the MAC Montréal. Then there was "The good digital life!", an exhibition proposed to the EDF Foundation by Fabrice Bousteau. The Next Rembrandt, an artificial intelligence program that paints the data we give it... it raised rather outdated, somewhat superficial questions: "Will the machine take the artist's place? Or on the contrary, make him immortal?" What is the link between Rembrandt (in the flesh) and a program that models and mimics its way of doing things? A painter painting in the manner of, a writer writing a pastiche, this does not call into question the skill of an artist or his mortality. Why would it be different with code? We found the same kind of questions in "Artists & Robots" at the national galleries of the Grand Palais. Such exhibitions are to be welcomed, as digital art has the right to gain prominence in leading institutions. "To have a 'digital art exhibition' is to leave him in his ghetto. The audience is ready!" Dominique Moulon repeats to anyone who wants to hear it. Be prepared to consider digital art as an ordinary art form.

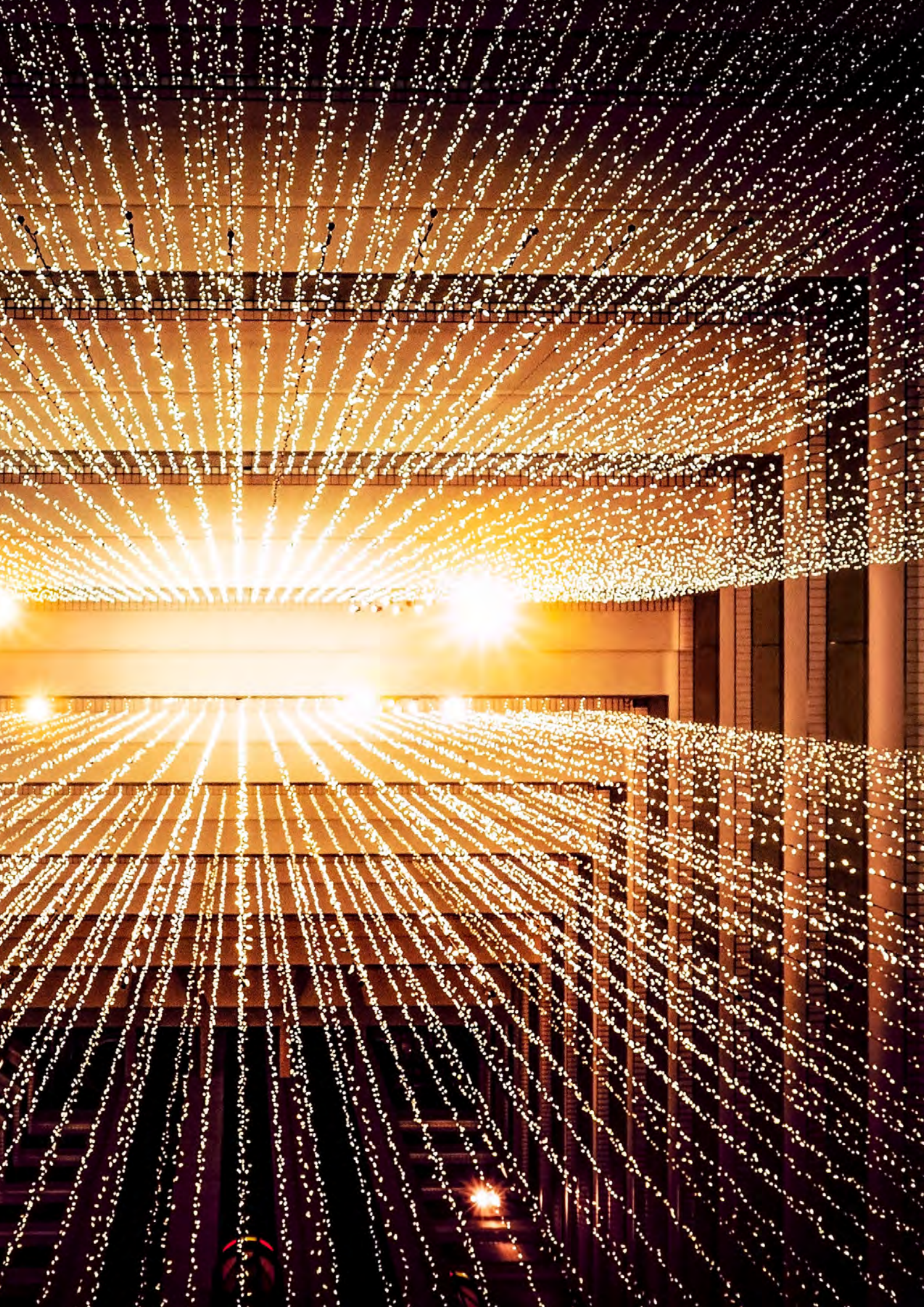
### A market in the process of being built?

If the public is ready, the question then follows...are the collectors? Digital art still often borrows from the business model of the performing arts, i.e. artists are paid for their performances, their participation in festivals, and some of whom can claim, in France, a remittance. A market for their products is also being built, albeit more slowly. The sector has long been organised around pioneering galleries, such as Bitform in New York, the Adam Gallery in Berlin or the Charlot Gallery in Paris. "The market is growing, we have every right to be optimistic", says Anne-Cécile Worms, the founder of Art2M (for "Art To Machine"). Her company produced Variation, the new media fair, and still produces the online magazine Makers, for the hackers, and Artjaws, the first marketplace dedicated to contemporary digital art. According to her, "there are great collectors, but they are few and far between in France. They are rather in Belgium, Switzerland, the United States. Afterwards, what sells best is always what hangs on the wall: multiple derivatives of generative works, screens, post-Internet artists..." To create value, as we have seen with video and photography: we transform into a multiple (finite) what has a technical or technological reproduction capacity (infinite).

Ars Electronica, the annual major gathering of technological arts, is not known for its connections to the market, but has set up a sales platform this year as digital artists are entering the largest galleries, especially those of the Post-Internet generation. Artie Vierkant has just signed with Perrotin, Cory Arcangel is represented by the Lisson gallery and Thaddaeus Ropac. "The last edition of Art Basel in June 2018 revealed an interesting and counter-trend phenomenon: 'High-end' galleries have recently begun to present digital artwork, and they do not treat them as experimental UFOs", explains Valentina Peri, who has been co-directing the Charlot Gallery in Paris since 2011. "On the contrary, they have undertaken the necessary work to integrate these artists into their programs and give them a place in art history". Thus, Pace launched FUTURE\PACE in 2016, to engage with artists using new technologies, helping them in particular to develop pieces designed for public spaces.

Even at auction, digital moves. Some specialised sales have already taken place and Christie's will soon offer the hammer a "new classic portrait" of the Obvious trio, an oil on canvas printed in 3D on a model made from GANs. GANs are the machine learning algorithms that have been exciting the small world of technology lately, because they are able to build generative models, i.e. capable of producing data themselves. By intersecting two artificial neural networks, for example, ultra-realistic images can be generated. Christie's hopes to get between \$7,000 and \$10,000 from the portrait of Edmond Belamy at a publishing sale in New York at the end of October. According to Artprice, more than 61,800 machine-produced creations have already been offered for sale.







Recently, there has also been the emergence of bitcoin and blockchain in the art market - some artists have already made it a subject of debate in their work, such as Simon Denny. In April 2015, MAK (Vienna) was the first institution to acquire a work in Bitcoin, a screensaver by Harm van den Dorpel. The transaction was carried out on cointemporary, a platform specialised in the sale of digital artists' works in cryptomonnaie. A London gallery owner, Eleesa Dadiania, accepts Bitcoins and various alt-coins, up to her own currency that she will soon launch, the dadicoïn. Artist Sarah Meyohas has created a series of digital prints that can be purchased in BitchCoin. There are also the plantoids, "forms of autonomous life, capable of reproducing, on the blockchain", according to their creator, Primavera de Filippi. They are hybrid creatures that live both in the physical world (mechanical device made of recycled steel and electronic components) and in the digital world (as software deployed on the blockchain). To make your plants grow, you replace the sun with Bitcoins. Once a given amount is collected, it is used to think about the next generation of flowers.

### Insecurity

In short, across the board there are favourable signs, even if some shadows loom. The Variation fair will not open this year as the event operated at a loss, explains Anne-Cécile Worms. "We have sold pieces, supported the artists, we are proud of it. But this model is no longer part of our strategy, we are re-focusing on less mainstream, more targeted activities". Art2M is relocating to the USA where things are moving and where there are the most dynamic collections; that of Hampus Lindwall, for example, which makes its net.art works available on the web (Jodi, Evan Roth, Petra Cortright) or the Thoma Art Foundation (Chicago) which brings together heavyweights (Nam June Paik, Harold Cohen, John Gerrard, Vera Molnar...). The closure of Variation is accompanied by others, such as the historic Carroll Fletcher Gallery (London). The separation of the two partners, Jonathon Carroll and Steve Fletcher, who will change their activities, the first to open a new gallery, the second to run a non-profit organisation, The Artists' Development Agency.

Finally, there are the structures whose future may be in jeopardy. On 12 September, Valérie Péresse dissolved the cultural agency, Arcadi, in a letter to the Minister of Culture, Françoise Nyssen. Arcadi was the institution responsible for the Nemo biennial. The president of the Ile-de-France regional council complained about bell tower wars and obstructions in the Drac, and asked the State to take back the baby - stating in passing that "no project led by Arcadi will be sacrificed to maintain the euro at all costs". Behind the scenes, things are getting creative to keep the boat afloat. According to our sources, cuts have been made in the performing arts and some projects have been abandoned, but the next Nemo Biennale will be launched. However, these difficulties complicate the work of the organisers, undermine the artists, and remind us of the precariousness of major events. Nils Aziosmanoff, the co-founder of the Cube (Issy-les-Moulineaux), makes an icy assessment of the situation. "My feeling is that there is a cultural bankruptcy in France on the digital issue. The business world has taken note of the profound, paradigmatic change taking place before our eyes. On the other hand, the field of culture is sadly conservative. Not the artists, who take on their role as pioneers without batting an eyelid, nor the public, who are present at demonstrations on the subject, but institutions, the mainstream media... We are in a way returning to a situation that we already knew at the time of the Salon des indépendants: current creation is not on the radar of the elites, which deprives society of new imaginations. Art is a powerful vehicle for social inclusion, an openness to global change and the construction of new narratives."

### Social subjects, territories of digital art

There are many changes, and the public is curious. "Some technologies, some phenomena feed many fantasies", observes Dominique Moulon, "artificial intelligence, transhumanism... To talk about all this, to evoke all these issues, curators and critics are naturally led to expose or comment on artists. Some social issues can no longer be addressed without digital arts."



© Michael Lönfeldt

The territories covered by artists are growing, in line with the digital future of the world. Some people renew bio-art by decoding the genome. This is the case of Heather Dewey-Hagborg, a biological hacker, who made 3D impressions of the (probable) portrait of quidams or Chelsea Manning from their DNA, whether it is taken or found on the street; or Tal Danino who in his *Microuniverse Glasses* "draws" with microorganisms. The AI is also in vogue, with chatbots, more or less precise, more or less intelligent. We have seen artificial intelligence that is a bit naive, but tenderly loving, like Antoine Schmitt's *Deep Love* (2017), or others, more socially marked, like *Sandy Speaks* (2016) by American Artist who pleads the cause of Sara Bland, victim of police violence in the US. And it should also be remembered that Google has inaugurated its second artificial intelligence research centre in Paris, with projects related to artists. There is also the world of video games, which is making a name for itself in the world of art. Machinima (videos captured in real time inside virtual spaces, usually via the game graphics engine) have had several expositions in recent years, and especially the Rockstar Editor software, which allows anyone to use the excellent GTA V engine to create videos. There are also collectives that make video games a work of art, willingly adapting them to space, such as *One Life Remains* and *Ascidacea*, both based in the Paris region.

Clément Thibault