

WOLF LIESER

DIRECTOR OF DAM GALLERY

Wolf Lieser initiated the Digital Art Museum (DAM) project, which includes an online museum, an award in partnership with Kunsthalle Bremen and a gallery in Berlin. His strategy is simple: integrate new media into the art world.

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Wolf Lieser

Is the mainstream finally ready to accept digital artworks?

When you have been working in this field for such a long time, you went through a time when it was totally rejected. People didn't understand media at all, and they didn't understand the importance and influence it would have on contemporary culture and art.

I've been doing it for 20 years, and now we are entering a different phase, which prompted me to change the strategy of DAM. With this phase, I mean something which is "post-Internet" (as coined by Rachel Greene from Rhizome). She talked about these digital natives: they've grown up with the Internet, they don't care if it's Internet, they don't care if it's digitally produced, but they are referring to this kind of culture, to this kind of thinking, and to this kind of media which are involved in their daily life, with their art.

You can see it from the way normal people are using applications or little playful things on their iPads or Androids or whatever, many things like the Austrian artist Lia has done, and you can download this software piece. Is this art or is this not art? It really doesn't matter. They download it, they think it's great, and they like to play around with it. So people are definitely open on a much broader basis, and they feel it's a normal part of their esthetics and dealing with esthetic objects. That's what I'm interested in now. I'm not interested in painters who are painting landscapes in a new format.

But what about museum institutions and the art market?

I always have one foot in the market with people who don't know anything and one foot with the people who are producing this kind of work. So I'm bridging this, and I still feel that the general art market, the general art scene, is just entering the point of understanding the importance of this. That's my perception.

I see that museums are implementing curators who have some idea (the ones before had no idea), somebody has some understanding and is trying to learn about it and trying to dig into it. They're starting to buy this kind of work and they understand more about it. That's also what I'm succeeding in—finding collectors who really start to understand that and see the future. It's obvious if you really look at it analytically and observe the art market. You can see the influence of digital media everywhere.

How did you get the idea for an online museum?

When I started DAM, I had a gallery in London, a second gallery in parallel to the one I had in Frankfurt, which was dedicated only to digital art. It was 1999 to 2002. It was not very well known, because it was a really small gallery. I did it with a partner, who had already started it with someone else, then the other one left and we got to know each other. He said, why don't you join me, and I said, well that's what I'm most interested in, let's try it. London: a lot

Fram Bartholl,
Olia Lialina, 2012.



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of money, it never worked. We paid money every month; he made his money with Web design, and I made it in the gallery near Frankfurt, with traditional media (painting, photography, what I could make money with).

But at that time I was thinking about a concept and the possibility of how to develop this whole topic for the art market, and I came up with this idea of an online museum. Of course, I had no money to put into finances, so I had to come up with ideas that were a lot easier to finance... So we developed this website, the online museum, to first of all make people aware of the history of it. To show them that it already started in the 1960s and that there are pioneers who are still working, who have a persistent career of 30 or 40 years, and so on. So that was the beginning, and then the second step was always to have a gallery to develop a market, because all these artists hardly ever sold anything.

How do you deal with the issue of the original, or the value of a rare artwork, when digital pieces can be copied, pasted and downloaded?

We all know that there are no originals, because the copy is exactly the same as the first piece. So artists have pursued the normal strategies that are used in the market. For example, Casey Reas, he only produces one software piece. So if he produces a new software piece, it's produced once, and sold only once. I just had a meeting with a director from FRAC, and she wants to show a piece that is owned by a collector in Germany, so of course he will loan it to them, but we have to approach him and ask him to loan it. Even so, the artist keeps the software. That is an extreme position. Others are doing this normal thing, like 3 or 5 editions of it. It's all because of the market. Of course, you could easily produce hundreds. There's a new website where they're starting to promote and sell digital formats, 500 or 200 or 300 times. But from my perception, it's still easier to sell a



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Casey Reas,
Signal to Noise,
2012.

good artwork which costs 5,000 Euros 5 times than to sell it 200 times for 100 Euros.

That's what the situation is. The more that will change, it will develop a different kind of dealing with a lot of software art, which is basically software-based art. Because it will be available to a larger public and will be distributed along different lines, like what happened with music. I think something similar will happen with visual experiences or visual incidents, which are software-based, through the Internet and through distribution lines. But this is probably aside from the art market. The art market will always stay, because people are only willing to spend larger amounts of money if they at least have the feeling of some level of exclusivity.

Most digital artists have avoided the market, going from residencies to festivals, from workshops to conferences. Would you say that the primary mission of a gallery owner is to accompany these artists so that their work will penetrate the market, given its currently dominant position?

That is obvious. A good example is Aram Bartholl, who is someone I've known for several years in Berlin, and I've followed his whole development. He has been living like that, being invited to conferences, traveling there, being there, residencies, scholarships, and so on. And he made a living from it. After all, it's a tough life, and still, you're not making enough, really. It never gets easy. You're constantly on the run, you have to go there and travel a lot, and besides that, you have to create some fantastic ideas in between so that you keep going. He was really good at that,

and he did some great projects, which made him really famous internationally.

Because on the other side, the moment you can establish yourself on the art market, and that's how it works, prices will go up if you keep selling your work, and then you can finally enter a phase where you can move out of all this traveling and concentrate on your art as such. Which is, of course, a much better perspective. I have nothing against going to do a lecture, but many of these lectures or festivals are totally unimportant for your career in the end. You just go there and get your maybe 500 Euros, you fly there and it's 3 or 4 days you've spent all together, and it's nice to meet the friends and the group and all the people again which you know from all the other festivals anyway, but to get into safe waters, you have to establish yourself as an artist on an international scale.

Then I imagine that different artists have different reactions to this chaperoned transition into new territories?

Definitely the best way to go about it is with a good gallery that is working hard to introduce you to collectors. That's what happened with Aram. We have sold several pieces from him, and that will go on; he's producing good work. We didn't need to change anything on what he's doing, because he had already produced pieces which were sellable. Others are not, but that's fine as well. I think it's also important to let artists do their work, what they want to do, even if it's dangerous. We have a show now with Casey Reas. He basically discontinued the esthetic of his earlier software pieces. His body of work had some

common characteristics up to 2010-2011, which he totally discontinued. The new stuff is totally hard-edged, no longer feathery, hairy, anything like those soft structures. It's really hard edges, and totally different esthetics going along with it. He decided to do that in the next show, and he was working till the last minute, so I really didn't know what was coming, and I knew it could be dangerous. It could happen that the customer, his collectors might say, oh I don't like it. Don't you have something from the past?

I recently saw a mural fresco by Casey Reas at the Art Institute of Chicago, but it was inside the architecture and design galleries. Is this the place for a digital artist?

Casey is very sensitive about this whole design aspect. He tries to avoid it if possible. But on the other hand, he was so influential with his Processing and everything that he developed in this scene, so he's such a big name through that, that they always take on this. But even if he had this influence, in the end it will not be important that in the beginning he was first influencing the design world. I know many, many artists who work with Processing. At one time in the future, it will just be that. It doesn't really matter in the end. Right now it's sometimes a bit uncomfortable for him, but in the end, what will count is that his work will be there. You saw his very long wall piece, a digital piece that was produced on site. Who cares if someone declares it design or art? People love it, and that's what art is about. ■

INTERVIEW BY DOMINIQUE MOULON

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