

## **A special atmosphere, an interactive galaxy.**

**Interview with Geert Mul by Fernando Castro Flórez** (Lecturer, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid; Art Critic and Exhibition Curator, Madrid, Spain)

- 1) You studied Visual Arts and Computer Animation in Arnhem and, as you have said before, you embarked on a series of trips to the USA, Mexico and Japan. At the outset of your creative work you practised what we might call a certain pictorialness. Could you tell us something about how you worked at that time and what were your primary concerns?

My primary concern? In that time (1992) was survival. I had spent all my money travelling, ended up in Japan and I wanted to stay there for as long possible. I loved Japan the minute I arrived. A world sharing the same economical system as Europe and the USA, but so completely different from everything I knew.. Like I had ended up behind the mirror of Alice in Wonderland. I wanted to know how this was possible. A world with its own inner logic, so rich in culture, based on an entirely different paradigm. A world shaped by Energy and Context. Unlike the world where I came from, which was shaped by Static Form and Abstractions.

I tried to survive by selling photographs on the street. Photographs of Tokyo. It did not work out. I was naïf. I started selling bracelets on the street and ended up as an Bartender in an restaurant. I left about a year later with enough money to travel the rest of Asia.

- 2) Then you started to make pieces on video and worked with performances as a VJ. What significance did this live work and, above all, the contact with a public more involved in music and club culture have for your later work?

From 1995 to 2000 in worked almost fulltime as a VJ. I wanted to become financial independent. In 1995 the word VJ did not even exist. I had to define it myself, define the language, define the act. I did this work very intensively and I was successful. The visual language I developed never left me. It's a visual language related to music, without an starting point or ending point in time. Based on the basic components of visual language; rhythm, repetition, colour. Nothing complex would survive in a club.

- 3) When did you start to make interactive installations?

I started to think about generative installations in the same period as I was VJ-ing. I was obsessed with the grammar and the syntax of visual language, and I was looking for a way to *generate* meaning by using a simple visual grammar and software. For me, an interactive installation is first of all a dynamic, generative installation. 'Interactive' usually implies a goal, a direction. In my works there are no directions, there is just space to roam in.

- 4) You have said in a previous interview that “the scepticism about interaction often stems from delineations and definitions that no longer apply. This is about a language we hardly speak and that makes it incredibly difficult to

communicate about it". In what way do you believe we have overcome this "scepticism"?

This interview was done in 2000. Maybe the 'scepticism' was in me.... It was at the height of the Digital Bubble. At that time I thought the world was changing rapidly and that soon the old notions of western art and culture would be replaced by a New Notion of Culture. The emphasis in western culture and art on 'static form' and 'autonomy' would soon be replaced by an emphasis on 'dynamic processes' and 'networks'. The digital medium was the vehicle that would bring us these fundamental changes. Now I understand that 'change' has its own pace. But I still try to construct another language, based on dynamics. I still think the West needs a new language to formulate their current status and a future. Because I think that the binding element of culture should be based on shared dreams of a future, not on shared experiences of the past.

- 5) You also claimed that you are not interested in linear cinematographic narrative, though this does not mean that your works are completely arbitrary: "So I look for as much coherence as is necessary to evoke an atmosphere or a theme without it immediately becoming a story". Could you tell us a bit more about the type of "narrative" you formulate?

The narrative is in us. That's my starting point. By applying 'formal' rules of structure to collections of images I try to generate story's in order to evoke associations and emotional identification. For example, I made a video called 'Portraits of Warsaw' (7 Min. 2004). For this video I collected hundreds of portrait-photos created by photographers in Warsaw. Then I applied a formal rule to this collection, I organized the photos on age. Starting with babies, then teenagers, and so forth, ending with photographs on tombstones. It resulted in a short film about birth, marriage, life, death, pain, happiness, the awareness of mortality.

Now here is my point: I never created that story, and I did not put any of my emotion in that movie. My act of creation was to formulate and apply a rule, which organized the images in the database. When I first saw the result, it was as touching, surprising and new for me as for any other person.

- 6) You take from David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson the idea that in a work of art the "form" as a concept is not opposed to "content", rather that what many people consider form is actually part of the content itself.

In media art it is ridiculous to distinguish 'content' from 'form'. It does not get you anywhere. When I was working at the IVAM on 'Local Squares, Global Stars' a visitor said to me, "I like the technology you have developed but I would have made something completely different with it." It's like saying to a painter, I really like your canvas, but I would have preferred a different painting on it. I mean, what's the point? Either you like the work or you don't, differentiating form from content does not get you anywhere, it only confuses the discussion.

- 7) How does your “Split Representation” (2004) installation at the Rotterdam School of Economics work, and how is it integrated into this “extra-museal” space?

The Installation ‘Split Representation’ collects two types of images from satellite television: news and commercials. The images are recorded daily from about 30 different international television channels. The computer holds about 40.000 television fragments in memory, and the Image Recognition software analyses every image using about 5000 parameters. The computer then starts to look for similarities between images from the NEWS category and the COMMERCIALS category. When the computer finds images that are visually related, it shows them in pairs. This creates pairs of images whom have a strong visual resemblance, but often a contradicting meaning. The place where this installation is showing is a school for higher economics. The main components of economy, Politics and the Market are represented in this installation by television News and Commercials. The installation is commenting on the social economical situation on a day to day bases. On the other hand it’s raising the question, if nearly identical images can have a contradicting meaning, then where is the meaning of an image situated? Apparently for a very small part in the image itself..

- 8) In “Sorted” (2003) for Schouwburgplein (Theatre Square) in Rotterdam you provide space for “actors” who are skaters, breakers, homeless people, while in “Expose” which you made for Eindhoven you rearrange or edit video material sent by students, not unlike what you did in “Generating Torino” (2002) where you invited schoolchildren between 10 and 12 years of age to film images of Turin for a collage. What importance do these “juvenile gazes” have in your work? Do you operate like a conductor of an orchestra with a series of sound-visual collectives?

In a way, yes. Like I said, the visual language I have developed is related to music. It focuses on the relation between structure and meaning. To really focus on the syntax of visual language I stopped using my own photo’s and video’s as they where only distracting me, because my emotional relation with the material. So I started to work with material that was not related to me, and see if I could generate or formulate some form of expression or meaning by simply applying formal principles of organisation to those collections. The eyes of schoolchildren, or street kids, (whom I worked with in South Africa 2005) or other visual ‘amateurs’ are relatively ‘unspoiled’ compared to professionals like me or other media professionals. As I pointed out, we cannot see without applying ‘meaning’. These “juvenile gazes” are very pure and straightforward observations. Perfect visual material to structure, order and reorder. Like the letters of a visual alphabet...

- 9) In “The Library of Babel” (2003) you make an explicit reference to the fascinating story with the same title by Borges in which he allegorizes the idea of the infinite. What attracts you about the idea of infinitude and randomness? To what extent does our archivist drive reveal nothing more than our fear of the indeterminate?

The story by Borges puts the following question to me: Once you have access to all possible information, how do you find the truth? (with the current state of the internet, this question is relevant) What fascinates me is that we tend to try to find truth in the world surrounding us. But it is just how we structure the 'facts' that tells the story. And since we are the ones structuring the 'facts' basically, we are the ones that create the truth. Those principles of organisation can be very coherent and in a beautiful logic. But that fact is that the Japanese, or the 'easterners' for that matter, just choose to structure things differently. Very coherent and beautiful as well. Are they just illuminating another dimension of the same 'truth'? Or are they creating a new truth? A new world? I would say the latter. But, without devaluating the experience of truth. The experience of truth is absolute. I would say that our archivistic drive is a drive for survival, since constructing reality, creating culture, is a survival strategy.

- 10) In some of your interventions, for instance "Bellini V\_01" (2001) or "Generative India" (2005), one can discern an interest in the "chromatic". Is there a symbolism in your use of colour or do you use it for its ornamental qualities?

Colour is maybe the visual element most close to sound. It does not necessarily suggest 'matter'. It's very quick, like music, it can travel the world, hopping from one culture to another. Colour for me is an emotional expression. I don't differentiate between symbol or ornament, I think they are the same. I think it's almost universal in its meaning.. Apparently people from all cultures feel less warm in a blue space than in a red space. But no language is entirely universal. According to the Japanese, the traffic light jumps not to green, but to blue (!) after the red signal. They have the same traffic lights as we have. But nobody can fool them by making them believe that that color is green and not blue. It's interesting that the use of red and green, because they are contradicting colors in the spectrum, make so much sense to us. Well.. only to us apparently..

- 11) You have just prepared "Local Squares, Global Stars" for the Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno. Could you tell us a bit more about this intervention?

First of all, I like football, but I would never have thought to incorporate it into my work. After I was proposed to make an artwork in relation to the Valencian Football Club, I spend a lot of time trying to figure out how I could relate the club to my work. Finally I decided to portrait the club in two ways.

As a social structure, a hierarchic structure in which there are many groups involved: The players, the trainer, the director, the board, the old-players, the fans, the hard-core supporters, the girls in love with the players, the old supporters, the v.i.p.'s wanting to relate themselves to the club, the kids dreaming to become an footballer / superstar ect.

2<sup>nd</sup>, the club as a visual & cultural structure. Most football clubs have very strong roots, and have a very specific local identity. It is fascinating that the identity of a town even shows in how the local club plays football. And the club defends the towns honour, there is an strong analogy with warfare.. But football also has an international face. The players come from everywhere and so do the trainers. It is international big business.

The first theme is represented in the work by a database filled with categories of portraits, and the second theme is represented by categories of visual structures and icons, both from the city of Valencia and from the stadium and its surroundings.

- 12) This singular “collective portrait” contains something of tessellation or the arabesque. If, on one hand, it paralyses or hypnotises the beholder, on the other hand it is his/her movements that modify what s/he sees. In your view, what are the basic reactions or feelings in front of this landscape of appearances?

I would like that the first reaction or emotion would be one of slight confusion. How can this be about football?, what is happening, how is this work relate to my movements? Is everything I see here coincidental or is it orchestrated? If it is coincidental, how can it have any significance? Where is the order in this work, what are the rules?

All those questions are legitimate and sometimes necessary to finally ‘see’ the work. The public is forced to make sense out of what they are presented with. They have to take responsibility for what they make out of it. I don't think it is a difficult work. Complex, maybe. The only difficulty might be present be in the perception of the viewer, thinking to much and not seeing and experiencing enough.

- 13) What reflections does your interactive installation pose on the world of sports and, more specifically, on this constellation of stars called football players?

Like I said, I focussed on football as an expression of local culture. Considering the amount of international players it is a miracle that this relation between local culture and football is still so intact. A great and wonderful miracle. Even a club like Arsenal from London, with a French coach and hardly any English players seems to represent a specific London attitude. I'm not so sure about clubs like Real Madrid, or Chelsea, the big, big, big business clubs... Or possibly they represent a local culture obsessed with big business?

- 14) Finally, do you believe that contemporary art museums are responding well to the new expressive registers or are they still largely anchored in “conservative” attitudes privileging a fetishism for the pictorial as if it were an absolute value?

Five years ago I would have stated that the museums just represented conservative upper-class culture. But things are changing. (or is it me?) Not as fast as I once expected, but the art world is surprisingly flexible. In the time that I was an art student most museum directors completely dismissed al artwork related to the so-called 'new media'. They were simply waiting until this 'hype' was out, and the art world could go back to business as usual, restoring the believe in the old system of values that was created in Holland after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. But things will never go back to normal, because things never do...Thanks to the media, the so called 'underground' and surprisingly (for me) the galleries, whom were happy to investigate new options and new definitions. Culture is dynamic by definition. The only justification for art is to define culture, to proof that so called reality can, or could have been different.

**Dec 2005**

**Fernando Castro Flórez**