

**CCC#4 (COLLECTORS CURATORS COLLABORATIONS)  
MANKIND / MACHINEKIND****WORKS FROM THE COLLECTIONS OF ALAIN SERVAIS, HAMPUS LINDWALL,  
ROBERT BIELECKI AND LI ZHEN / EXHIBITION MAKER : DOMENICO  
QUARANTA****DAUER: 5. NOVEMBER 2015 – 6. FEBRUAR 2016****AIDS-3D, JULIETTE BONNEVIOT, CHRISTOPHE BRUNO, TIANZHUO CHEN, IAN  
CHENG, PETRA CORTRIGHT, JOHN GERRARD, TAYLOR HOLLAND, JODI,  
LIGORANO/REESE, JEAN-BAPTISTE MICHEL, MANFRED MOHR, JON  
RAFMAN, EVAN ROTH, RAFAEL ROZENDAAL, UBERMORGEN**

Dear Collector,

I'm writing you a letter because what you do is very personal and what I have to say fits better to the form of a private conversation than an essay. Although this letter is open, I'd love to keep discussing with you in private, if you wish.

The show where you picked up this publication is about collecting digital media art, and that's the topic I'd like to discuss with you: not to tell you that you should collect it, but to tell you that you can, if you like. It's not that hard, as long as you have the "epiphany". I guess you know what I'm talking about. The epiphany is the realization that makes you address your collecting activity in a certain direction. All the collectors that offered pieces for this show had the epiphany at a certain stage in their life. The occasion may be trivial: you are using a business software tool, you are video-chatting with your girlfriend, watching Edward Snowden on YouTube or TV, running while listening to music, paying for a coffee with a credit card, when suddenly you realize to what extent digital means of communication have changed your life and the world over the last years, and this at all levels. You have never been a techno-enthusiast and never will be; but, for better or for worse, this has happened, IS happening. It's contemporary life, and contemporary art should relate to it somehow: by celebrating, portraying, criticizing or consciously refusing this change, and by using, abusing, perusing or consciously refusing the tools and languages introduced with the digital shift. This shift is both a culture, with its new set of topics, and a media shift introducing a new set of creation and communication tools; so we should expect contemporary art to respond to these topics and confront these tools, as it always has.

Once you had the epiphany, what comes next is not as easy as buying an oil painting in a gallery or an art fair, but it's not that hard either; and it can be really beautiful and challenging. The first thing you have to realize is that there's no such a thing as digital media art, or whichever label is used to describe it. There are just artists responding at different levels to the topics of their time, and using at different levels the tools of their time. Look at this exhibition: you can find websites, software, 3D animations, interactive works, but also paintings, prints and sculptural works. New media enlarge the set of tools available to an artist, but they also enable us to figure out different uses for existing tools. A special focus on a specific medium is rare in art, even if possible and interesting in itself; most artists are committed to a set of concerns and topics, but are pretty unfaithful in terms of media, and feel uncomfortable with this kind of categorization. So, don't be surprised if, right after having the digital millennium epiphany, you buy... a painting.

The second thing you will soon realize is that what you are looking for is not easy to find in the usual venues where you go to look for art. Even if, in recent years, a number of artists, curators, gallery owners, collectors and institutions had your same epiphany, in the art market and the mainstream contemporary art world this number is still pretty small. It's one of the paradoxes of the weird time you are living in, my dear collector. In a world where politics, economics, social relationships and private life, and with them most cultural ecologies (think about books, music and cinema), have changed dramatically by the advent of new means of communication; in this world the art world that has always played the role of the cultural avant-garde, has become a sort of conservative, elitist niche. The art world, not art, which often flourishes outside the confines of the art world, in more experimental, borderline situations and, of course, online. This may make your quest more difficult, but also more exciting. If you are the kind of committed collector who likes to research the art he/she loves, you will enjoy this situation immensely. Think about it. Everything will probably start in a place you are familiar with: an art fair, an auction, an art gallery where you' fall in love with the work of an artist you didn't know before. You'll talk with the artist, the gallery owner, a curator you met at the place, and they will direct you towards other artists and other galleries. They will suggest you books and magazines to read, and people to meet. Soon you will realize that what you can see in the art market is just the tip of the iceberg, and that many of the artists you love don't have a gallery to represent them or a market at all, and that their work is mostly presented and discussed in specialized venues. You will meet them, and you will buy works directly from them. Or maybe you will realize that the work is not actually collectable in its present form, and you will start a discussion with them that will push them to find solutions to engage this new arena. You will help them to translate a purely digital work into a physical work when it makes sense; and the cultural value of their work into money value; to conceal scarcity and ubiquity. But you will also learn things from them: like the value of sharing, and the possibility to conceal private property and public access, uniqueness and easy replicability. You will be the collector, the researcher, the curator and the producer, the gallery owner, the teacher and the student, all in one. "That's what I already do", you may say me. "I'm not the kind of guy who only attends the VIP program at Art Basel and Frieze and buys over the phone at art auctions. I do research, I talk with artists and sometimes I find other ways to support their work beyond mere collecting. I even buy videos. There's nothing special in what you are describing to me." Fine. That's exactly what I wanted to say before I stop bothering you: collecting digital media art is not that different from collecting contemporary art. As I mentioned before, most artists concerned with the digital are working with traditional and more stable media as well, and often employ different solutions to materialize their digital work and make it more fitting to the space of the gallery and the requirements of the art market. Editioned digital prints and videos, 3D printed objects, installations with custom or commercial devices are all relatively stable, relatively accepted ways to display the digital. Software and other works based on code may require skills that are unusual to a restorer in order to be preserved on the long term, but these skills can be easily found today: the artist may help while she's still alive, and institutions like Rhizome and Electronic Arts Intermix are training a new breed of preservation experts that can be of help. The same can be said for technologically complex installations: maintenance may be difficult, but not impossible. And anyway, collecting has always been about buying the things you love and THEN worrying about how to save them from the injuries of time, not the other way around. Don't let your fears prevent you from supporting the art you think would better represent the time you live in.

The main challenge brought by the digital to the practice of collecting is not actually related to maintenance, but to uniqueness. Collecting is all about scarcity. Until the digital, the market found its own ways to deal with mechanical reproduction, inventing the artifice of the limited edition that often was not even an artifice: a photography or a polished steel sculpture may be easy to reproduce, but a Gursky photo or a Koons sculpture may be very expensive to copy, and can't be distributed to a mass audience. In this case, the limited edition works just fine. But what about a videotape? And even more: what about a website? Or an animated GIF? Or a webcam video? Or a 3D model? Or an artist 's software? Everything digital can be duplicated seamlessly, fastly and cheaply, and without any loss in the process: each copy is a perfect double of the "original" you bought on some storage device in the gallery, my dear. Everybody can have it. There are of course technologies meant to protect property, but they can be easily circumvented and hacked. Moreover, a website is usually online and can be accessed by anybody. If you buy it, what can you do to protect your property? Put it offline? Set it privately? And if you do it, is it still a website?

Of course, you can keep collecting in the good old way and just bookmark websites and download videos and GIFs to your hard drive if you like them. That's still an option. But if you understand collecting not just as a way to accumulate precious objects, but also as a responsibility toward your culture and society, other options are available too. Buying an artwork is not just a way to own it. It's also a way to support the artist and help her develop a sustainable economy and keep doing art. It's a way to assume responsibility toward the artwork, to take care of it and of the way it is presented and preserved. Let's assume you bought an animated GIF: as a unique, a limited edition, an unlimited edition, whatever. The same GIF is available on the artist's website. Anybody can go there and download it in a second. You and these other people will own the same thing; what's different, however, is your ownership. As you bought it, your ownership is certified. In the future, this certificate will prove, without any doubt, that this piece is an original work by that artist. You have been informed about the best way to present it, and you take care that curators follow your instructions when you lend it. You can influence the history of the piece, and if required, develop strategies for preserving it and make it available on new devices. None of the people who downloaded it from the web would probably care about it the way you do. If, in the future, it would become a permanent part of our cultural heritage, we would probably have to thank you, my dear collector. The same can be said for a website. Ask the artist to store it on a device and remove it from the web, and you'll be the owner of a bunch of files on a flash drive. Buy it within its own domain, and you'll be the owner of a work of public art on the web. Everybody can access it, because that's part of its nature; but as the owner, you are responsible for its online presence, its dissemination and its preservation. It's like owning a site specific work of Land Art, or offering a piece of your collection to a museum as a permanent loan – only different: because the internet is a different kind of public space and communication media.

Another way of dealing with the accessibility and copy-ability of digital information is, of course, to support the practice beyond collecting. Art did not always exist in a market economy, and if you believe in its social function, my dear collector, you will believe that it will keep existing in a sharing economy. This is more or less all I wanted to tell you, my dear. But I would be happy if we would be able to keep this conversation alive in some form. If you'd like to as well, just drop me an email.

My warm regards,

Domenico Quaranta

Special Thanks to all collectors!

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The logo consists of a solid red square. Inside the square, the words "wirtschafts", "agentur", and "wien" are stacked vertically in a white, serif font. The text is left-aligned within the square.

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