GRAFTING AS ART PRACTICE. INTERVIEW WITH AURÉCE VETTIER

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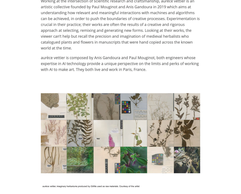
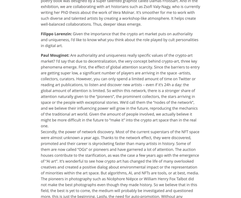


Aurèce Vettier, Fictions, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Working at the intersection of scientific research and craftsmanship, Aurèce Vettier is an artistic collective founded by Paul Mougenot and Anti-Gandhuora in 2019 which aims at understanding how relevant and meaningful interactions with machines and algorithms can be achieved, in order to push the boundaries of creative processes. Experimentation is crucial in their practice; their works are often the results of a creative and rigorous approach at selecting, remixing and generating new forms. Looking at their works, the viewer is invited to reflect on the relationship between the aforementioned inanimate entities with contingent plants and flowers in manuscripts that were hand-copied across the known world at the time.

Aurèce Vettier is composed by Anis Gandoura and Paul Mougenot, both engineers whose expertise is in fact increasingly present in a unique perspective in the fields and ports of working with AI to make art. They both live and work in Paris, France.



Aurèce Vettier, Augmeta Hortorum protocol by GDNet user on last Hackers. Courtesy of the artist.

Filippo Lorenzin: Paul, it is rather unique to find collectives of creatives working together nowadays, especially in the field of so-called "new media art". I wonder if you could tell me about how you started your collaboration and what it means for each of you to work as a collective. For example, does it shape your creative process?

Paul Mougenot: Aurèce vettier is indeed an artistic collective I founded in 2019 with Anis Gandoura. We met in engineering school, we studied computer science and mathematics for the most part. It is in this context that we developed a collaboration in more and more crucial, we see it as an organic experiment. We've known each other for a long time and followed each other in our early professional adventures. In 2015, we co-founded an AI company deploying image recognition technology in the fashion sector. By training, tweaking and implementing models, we studied extensively the mathematical and technical environments in this field at that time.

Filippo Lorenzin: Your approach to the development and making of artworks reminds me of how art workshops worked for centuries, under a single name one could find many experts in their own fields who worked together on many projects.

Paul Mougenot: Yes indeed, this is what we are trying to reach at aurèce vettier. It's not a studio where an artistic director / decide everything. It is rather an experimental group. For our upcoming exhibition in Paris, to be held in December 2021, we invited a cutting edge choreographer, Yuko Zama, to collaborate with us and develop a piece that was specifically designed for a super talented dancer named Clarisse Fronsart. And in the exhibition, we are collaborating with art historians such as Zsofi Valy Nagy, who is currently writing her PhD thesis about the work of Vera Molnar. It's smoother for me to work with such diverse and talented artists by creating a workshop-like atmosphere. It helps create unexpected associations. Thus, deeper ideas emerge.

Filippo Lorenzin: Given the importance that the crypto art market has had on authority and uniqueness, I'd like to know what you think about the role played by such personalities in digital art.

Paul Mougenot: Are authority and uniqueness really specific values of the crypto-art market? I'd say that its decentralization, the very concept behind crypto-art, three key phenomena emerge. First, the effect of global attention scarcity. Since the barriers to entry are getting super low, a significant number of players are entering in the space: artists, collectors, curators, institutions, etc. Secondly, the power of the community. It is key in the reading and publications, to listen and discover new works and artists. And finally, due to the global amount of attention it birthed, to withdraw this work, there is a stronger share of attention required by the "pioneers", the prominent collectors. We are working in a space or the people with exceptional stories. We'd call them the "nodes of the network", and we believe that influencing power will grow in the future, re-introducing the mechanics of the traditional art world. Given the amount of people involved, we don't see any other solution than to believe in the future to "make it" into the crypto art space than in the real life.

Secondly, the power of network discovery. Most of the current superstars of the NFT space were almost unknown a year ago. Thanks to the network effect, these key discoveries are promoted and their career is skyrocketing from one moment to another. Many of these artists have been working for years in their own corner, and suddenly a whole community focused combined on the clarification, as was the case a few years ago with the emergence of "AI art". It's wonderful to see how crypto art has changed the life of many overlooked creatives and created a positive dialog about environmental impact or the democratization of minorities within the art space. But algorithmic, AI, and NFTs are tools, or at least, media. The pioneers in photography such as Nickiphore Niépce or William Henry Fox Talbot did not make the best photographs even though they made history. So we believe that in this space, the artists that will make the most impact are the ones mastering experimental more, this is just the beginning. We need the auto-promotion. Without any intermediaries, artists have to promote their own work, one way or another to achieve sales. This is the part we are the most uncomfortable with. As far as we are concerned, we can have many roles or interests, but it stops at being a merchant. Not because of the commercial aspect, but because it fundamentally contradicts our to give context, tell stories, and to find the right words. We believe that protection for future ratings will be met with the right tools, and that the right tools will be developed by communities and founder-more in the future, to give more curatorial angles to the space.

Aurèce vettier, Extraction essentielle #006, 30.03.2021, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Filippo Lorenzin: How do you see the role played by AI in your practice? Is it like a collaborator that ultimately "bombs" artificial existence in the name of what you wouldn't be able to do by yourselves or it is more like the third active member of aurèce vettier?

Paul Mougenot: What we do is research. Our working is not trimmers what always presents, mainly from a theoretical, conceptual and aesthetic standpoint. As great admirers of pioneers like Etiene Radigue, Vera Molnar or Peter Tork- among many others- we measure what their generative research brought to us back in the 1960s and afterwards. To propose new paradigms, we try to reach maximum hybridity between human curation and technological expertise.

I wouldn't say it's "harmful" or "evil", at least it is as dumb as we are. It depends on the quality of our dataset and our models- but it's absolutely not the nth member of aurèce vettier. Ai, again, is a tool- in our case, the tools and process are secondary concerns. Our first concern is to remain constantly in the precarious equilibrium, on the frontier between an image of reality and dimensional data-space and our beautiful, analogical nature.

Filippo Lorenzin: I believe that very often the general public is interested in AI generated art in the same way as they would be with a magic trick: something happens behind the scenes and we, the viewers, are left to enjoy only what the artist/performer lets us to see and know. In this sense, I'm very curious to know more about your creative process and, say, a brushes or a brush; these are tools that have been used for many centuries and everybody knows how they work, at least at a basic level. AI is relatively new and only experts know exactly how it is developed and used to generate content, whether they are pictures, texts or music. In other words, I wonder whether AI generated art would be perceived in the same way as it does now if the public would know more about it in practical terms. What do you think?

Paul Mougenot: AI is not engineering, so we would tend to disagree. Of course, it might be hard for someone to reveal which algorithms were used - be it StyleGAN, Clip or Pixelrnn - but the process is not a mystery. Actually, we believe that the more people know, create our own datasets as it often represents 95% of the workload, it could be interesting to show how we interacted with craftsmen and ateliers that to create pieces that are out of this world. It is the way we think what matters is the audience. We want the audience to not see our shows, not necessarily our artists. Want the audience to invest our pieces, not necessarily our process, even though much of our work is conceptual.

Filippo Lorenzin: Diego Marcon@2018 is a book of poems written in collaboration with a Markov chain, a mathematical process that has been used many times in the past, notably in music. You rightly mention the influence of Paul Verlaine, Tristan Tzara and Guillaume Apollinaire, among others, poets that lived through what can be seen as the initial stage of modernity. Could you tell me more about this work and your point of view on the legacy of certain modernist experiments in art?

Aurèce vettier, Extraction #006, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Paul Mougenot: It's more than an influence, we actually trained the Markov chains on the works of these poets among a few more. But we are very inspired by movements like Oulipo, Dada, Lettrism, Surrealism, Futurism, Cubism, and so on. We think that the core of modern generative poetry. Damien Finisnet, the grandson of Raymond Queneau also introduced us to Typolexie, a sublime book by Jerome Peignot which is now constantly in our mind. We spend a lot of time reading and discovering new propositions in the field, not for benchmarking purposes but rather because it's sometimes exciting as a research to partly build on the propositions of others. However, we haven't seen many artists doing numerous forth and back trips between the machine and the human. We try to create super lucid texts and visuals, so in this field it looks like we are clearing new territory.

Filippo Lorenzin: In Latent Botanist Writings (2020) you trained your GANs with old manuscripts that were hand-copied across the known world at the time. Where is the long-forgotten handwriting style in which you've trained and how does it in an organic way. Can you elaborate on the technical process behind this work?

Paul Mougenot: When we programmed the GANs on herbaria, it generated not only beautiful images, but also hallucinations. It was very close to the process of calligraphy, what was supposed to be notes written by botanists. But it was on a new kind of alphabet, and it was wonderful to see.

Aurèce vettier, Latent botanist, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

In the exhibition, there will actually be reproductions of these raw "impossible writings" as oil paintings. So I gathered many GAN-generated notes and manually extracted a significant amount of letters, based on specific aesthetic considerations. Then, I created a new font that I called "Latent Botanist" and that is now part of my practice. I try to only have it on an off-line computer as I don't want this font to spread. It's kind of an industrial secret for me.

Recently, I was invited to take part in Twelve, a crypto-initiative project initiated by Kalen Iwamoto. For this project, I proposed a poem written in collaboration with Markov chains, the same process I used for my poetry book Elegia Machina but written in Latent Botanist. The poem is entitled Botanical Elegy. It's a reference to Thomas Gray's famous masterpiece Elegy Wrotten Churchyard, a reservoir at Nefs Anadol music about what's going to decade it. He mobilized many expert friends around him and spent almost a day on the enigma. Sometimes, I bury parts of a Rosetta stone, either in the blockchain or on physical works. Many of my pieces or texts are deeply intertwined, as you very rightfully say.

Filippo Lorenzin: The need to translate and transfer ideas from the real world to AI and back again seems to play a central role in your research, for example, in We Will Make You Bow To Your Creator (2020) you used the alphabet generated by GANs on a poem on small sandstone tablets. When did you start developing this physical approach?

Paul Mougenot: The need to project virtual calculations, models and generations into physical objects is a structural aspect of the projects. However, when I work with technologies, I don't have the need to turn everything into a glitchy, screaming and internet circus. It's actually quite the opposite. I want to be in a monastery, in a garden, in a cave, in a contemplative space. I'm not sure why, but I've always been like that. It's a bit like the sandstone tablets, I wrote a poem, indeed. But on the other hand, I wrote a medical diagnostic corresponding to a super hard time I had in a hospital a few months ago. So I can say two things: these pieces are so beloved and sensual that it took me a while to let them go. And it's not engineering, but some kind of alchemy that we fortunately good friends. And without the use of sandstone and the elegant secrecy offered by the Latent Botanist, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I'm very interested in the notion of ritual, and not just working on physical pieces. The paintings were created in collaboration with a Chinese craftsman called Jack Lee. The five large-size bronze sculptures are made in collaboration with Fonderie Fuzeau, an award-winning master chain of foundries in Aquitaine region in France. So these objects will have outstanding quality and it is crucial for me. Lastly, the works we produce are never "medium-native" but rather kinds of hybridization. For instance, our oil paintings are augmented. The wooden frame holds a lot of additional information and potential adventures.

Aurèce vettier, Extraction #006, 30.03.2021, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Filippo Lorenzin: To what degree do you believe the use of AI in art is tied to its technical development? In other words, would new engineering discoveries lead to works and art that are fundamentally different or is it rather that it doesn't matter as much as theoretical and philosophical research applied to it?

Paul Mougenot: Visually I dislike answering in this way but I strongly believe the use of AI in art is and is not, at the same time, tied to its technical development. On the one hand, AI research is very fast, and it's very important to stay up to date with the latest AI research such technologies. Sometimes, artists even had ideas and only could implement them a few years later, creating a "double dadaism" on the artworks. It is the case for Vera Molnar. On the other hand, I could witness the emergence of new types of processes, new types of aesthetics and new types of experiences around AI. Recently, I've been interested in the notion of "Deep Dream". It's a bit like the Mona Lisa experiment together and always come up with results. I believe this could never have been created in a relevant artistic way without the emergence of GPT-3 for instance. As far as I'm concerned, the starting point of a work can be either technical, because I try to play with sophisticated tools or intimate, when I play with an idea and build on it. In any case, this is the start of numerous back and forth trips. For instance, I'm starting with pen to image generation algorithms such as CLIP, or PIVI Wang's "Deep dream", trying to create a new kind of aesthetic, and then I'll switch to Photoshop, Illustrator, or Ps, or Ai, or even, as an imaginary journey, I selected fourteen important steps, like a stamm de cerise, for generating images to depict it, and will then turn them into small oil paintings, like previous post-surrealist icons.

Filippo Lorenzin: What are you working on right now?

Paul Mougenot: Apart from the exhibition in December, I've been working on various projects. One of them is a kind of "Deep dream" experiment, but instead of using AI I try to follow my own rhythm, I try to find what's happening of course but without losing too embashed in the current frenzy. The last piece I worked on in a personal trial, using an implementation of the "deep dauer" algorithm. It is called "a bowdrel man working on a completely large painting (All 2021 to 1.23)". I loved the outcome of the algorithm. I'll turn it into a painting with the help of Jack Lee, and might actually keep it around for a while.

aurevettier.com

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EDITOR AND CURATOR

Filippo Lorenzin is a London-based independent curator and critical theorist. His research is focused on the study of the effects of the introduction of new technologies in the field of contemporary art. Filippo is currently the Editor of Digicult and he is also the moderator between artists and the public through the mediating role of the artistic techniques throughout history. He takes part in talks and lectures, actively engaging with interesting figures at the borderline between art and human research.

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