Living Codes

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Around the middle of the nineties, many people aged between 5 and 40 years entered the new millennium thanks to the adoption of a virtual pet. Launched in 1996 by a Japanese company, the Tamagotchi allowed millions of people to familiarize with the idea of "simulation," a fundamental for the understanding of 21st century: an age when the reality is lived mainly in a mediated form and when actual experiences are cornered by simulations. How many of the *Farmville* peasants have actually seen a free-range chicken? How many of the *World of Warcraft* warriors have fought a real battle? Could you retrace the last journey you made without the help of the synthesized voice of a GPS navigator, or without your iPhone maps?

The Tamagotchi was a virtual answer to a real need: it offered an alternative to the lack of affection felt by those who, for many reasons, could not have a pet or a son, or those who did have them, but did not receive enough love from them. It was simulating a life, and it was effective enough in doing it that made us feel better. From a technological point of view, the Tamagotchi was the most advanced commercial application of forty years of research on the simulation of life. This latter, together with algorithmic generation of the image and information visualization, is one of the most sound and durable lines of informatics research, having roots traceable up to the sixties. All these three paths have found, during the years, the most different applications: in video-games and cartoon films; in object design and

interface design; in architecture, sciences and, last but not least, in contemporary art.

Living Codes is an exhibition that explores the developments in the latter field, trough the works of three artists differing for generation, studies and place of birth. The show's core theme is life, being it simulated, represented or even produced by means of digital code. The aim is to demonstrate that, in the age of information overload, of artificially generated images surrounding us everywhere and of simulations that are increasingly being confused with reality, the artistic research facing these themes reveals an extraordinary topicality, even in its apparently more formalistic outcomes.

Purposely however, the title of the exhibition is focused on the life of code, instead of being centered on the simulation of real life and its evolutive dynamics. The importance is given to code as a "life form," wholly created by man, and native of our days. An alien life form, built starting from an imitation of the deep structures of reality, and yet characterized by a radical alterity. In the science-fiction films of the seventies, the alien trying to emulate the human being, no matter how good was the result, was always revealing its differences. Nowadays, even if the media are doing their best to make us forget about it – just think about the realism in *Avatar* or in the last generation video-games - the artists stubbornly follow the opposite path, deliberately leaving realism apart and exploring the aesthetics typical to the digital world. In this way art acts, once again, as the critical consciousness of its time, showing us the direction we have chosen, offering an antidote to better understand it, and maybe to survive it. From the end of the seventies, Miguel Chevalier is working on the creation of immersive and interactive settings, greenhouses and herbariums where artificial plants are growing and reacting to human presence. Disciple of Des Esseintes, antihero of *A rébours*, a masterpiece of the Decadent movement in literature, Chevalier is not attracted by realism; rather, his plants display a peculiar aesthetics, completely artificial and based on geometries, straight cuts and transparencies. Moving backwards if compared to technological progress, his recent works make another turn toward an anti-realistic direction with the *Fractal Flowers*,

fascinating and cruel floral geometries that he translates in animations, printings and sculptures. If the director of *Avatar*, James Cameron, showed us how an artificial forest can appear perfectly real, Chevalier offers us a new lens to look at digital simulations: remembering us, on the one side, of the artificial nature of simulations, and teaching us, on the other side, how to appreciate their peculiar beauty.

This interest in simulating the inner life of genetics algorithms is shared by Alessandro Capozzo. His work, developed from the late nineties, is focused on the generative potentials of programming languages, specifically on the possibility of writing instructions that, once executed, will generate an infinite flow of images. It is a research rooted in minimalism and Process Art, that Capozzo translates in minimum and stark shapes, distant from the flamboyant chromaticism of Chevalier or from the apparent realism of an electron microscope adopted by Alex Dragulescu. As in Chevalier's works however, the realism of the processes is contrasting with the antirealism of the outcome. This is clearly visible in *Exuvia* (2006), installation created together with sculptress Katja Noppes. In this work a software part, definitely abstract, coexists with a physical intervention that starts on the LCD screen showing the software, where the wings of a dragonfly have been carved. From there, it extends in space, up to the point of creating a sort of translucent pod enclosing the installation. The organic metaphor ("exuvia" is the scientific term for the rests of a dragonfly's chrysalis) is however contradicted by a casted keyboard and mouse at the feet of the chrysalis itself: the alien shows again its actual, artificial nature.

In the works of Dragulescu we see the opposite process instead: the lenticular realism of his microbes, of his viruses and actinians is the outcome of a beautiful deception. Interested in information visualization, Dragulescu (also a researcher at the MIT Media Lab in Boston) searches for visual metaphors able to represent "entities" otherwise existing only within computers, but that already became part of our daily life to the point that we refer to them as if they were real: spam emails and computer viruses. Considering the latter, which are built as perfect replicas of their biological counterparts (they both reproduce themselves and infect a host), the

metaphor chosen by Dragulescu is, in a way, already implicit in their own nature; the spam emails are instead visualized in a completely uncalled-for way: now in colorful marine plants (*Spam Plants)*, now in peculiar architectures (*Spam Architecture*). The aim is to show us, on the one side, the beauty of information and, on the other side, to show us its extraordinary fluidity and ability to take the most different forms.