

## Italians Do It Better!!

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### I

*Italians Do It Better!!* was an exhibition that ought to be done. After a few years working as an art critic and curator, I learned to look with suspicion at the following things: exhibitions that seek to explore the artistic use of any given medium, and exhibitions that refer to an alleged national identity. Both these categories are today, in art, misleading and outdated. Artists are moving between media with the same freedom with which they cross national borders. Contemporary art is now a global Esperanto, a *lingua franca* that makes use of all media to generate a dialogue, on a common platform, between artists from all over the world.

This doesn't mean, of course, that the specific nature of a medium, as well as cultural identity, are obsolete, remnants of a past that someone tries, painfully and artificially, to keep alive. They are, however, the result of a choice, an achievement, not a badge or a label that qualify an artist for the simple fact that she is born in a certain place, or that she usually works with a specific medium. There are no such things as Iranian video art, German photography, Latin American performance, Japanese painting; and any attempt to cluster a group around terms like these has to fight, on the one hand, with *transnational* affinities and, on the other, with *transmedia* affinities. But there can be, and indeed there is, an artist who has carved with pain in her Iranian identity, and who has found in video the best suited language to talk about it; there can be, and

there is, an artist able to express – mostly in the form of a painting – contemporary Japanese culture and its elements of continuity and rupture with an ancestral tradition. Why, then, organize a show that, in a few words, can be described as nothing else than a selection of Italian artists who engaged with videogames as a medium and as a culture? What do they have in common, except the *Bel Paese* where they are born, the language they speak and their more or less occasional interest in games? Yet, sometimes shows like “Latvian Video Art” do make sense, and reveal their own necessity. It happens when the perception of the phenomenon they explore, in the international community of contemporary art, is wholly disproportionate to the nature of the phenomenon itself. That is, when the contribution that a country gave in a specific field of cultural production is, for those who know it well, much more important than it appeared, so far, in the international debate. In that case, the cultural institutions of that country have to restore the balance, bringing out what lies beneath. National identity may seem a vague and problematic concept, but for the cultural institutions of a state it is still a value that should be nurtured and protected. It is in the virtuous dialectic between globalization and local identities that contemporary culture is taking shape, without falling into a boring leveling.

It goes without saying that no Italian institution has ever tried to do anything even remotely close to *Italians Do It Better!!* This does not have to do only with the atavistic limits of Italian institutions, traditionally unable to adequately support the work of local artists engaged in the field of contemporary art, but also with the widespread difficulty to address the question of the impact of videogames on contemporary culture, and consequently of its dialogue with other arts, with the right tools.

Internationally, this study was carried out, with different results from country to country, within academia, with the rise of Game Studies, and within several other institutional frames (museums, media centers, and journals) which organized exhibitions, meetings and debates. The Italian situation was marked by a lack of interest by the local institutions interrupted only by sporadic efforts by individuals here and there. Therefore, the team that organized the event Neoludica should be credited for setting up an open platform for dialogue between academia, the game

industry, and contemporary art. A platform which is far from being perfect, but which should be praised for having raised, for the first time with such intensity, a series of crucial questions: How did the language of videogames evolve? What was its historical development? What was its impact on contemporary culture? How did it relate with the other arts? How can we act on this development?

Thus, we could not let this opportunity slip away. With this exhibition, we wanted to communicate a simple, yet powerful message: Italian art has made a decisive contribution to the recognition of videogames as one of the basic forms of contemporary culture and, more generally, to the reflection on videogame as a cultural artifact. The importance of this contribution can be measured by both the timeliness of some results, which have anticipated – or have developed in sync – with similar international achievements, and by its quality, indirectly proved by their participation in major international exhibitions on the subject. We felt it was necessary to document these achievements in an event in which could reach a mass audience, and thus stimulate a broader conversation.

## II

In 1996 Miltos Manetas, Greek-born artist transplanted to Italy, began a series of video works titled “after videogames”. A few years later, he wrote: «Copying from videogames is the art of our days» [1]. His work showed the impact that videogames, and more generally consumer technologies, were having on the culture and life of his and younger generations. Consoles and cables filled up the interiors pictured in his paintings, characters like Super Mario and Lara Croft returned obsessively in his prints and videos. In the latter, Manetas caught his subjects in moments of suspension, of “non play” - or rather, “non life” - in order to emphasize the indissoluble unity, in the game, between the player and the character, and the total impossibility, for the latter, to live without the first.

A year later, Antonio Riello made *Italiani Brava Gente*, a videogame that emulates the gameplay of old arcade games in order to stage a prime-time TV news material:

the massive migration of Albanians to Italy, mostly via boat. The work puts the player in the position to counter the migration, firing on the refugees' ships, and to arrange for their integration in the way suggested by the more fuddy-duddy parts of the public opinion. Back then, the "art games" genre was in its infancy, and the idea that the videogame could be used as an artistic medium was far from being broadly accepted. With its crude, simple graphics, rudimental sounds, amateur aesthetics, *Italiani Brava Gente* proudly displays its own wrinkles, aware of its extraordinary relevance. You just have to replace "Albanian" with "North African" to understand that Italy is still facing the problem of immigration in the same, disastrous way shown fifteen years ago [2].

*Italiani Brava Gente* invited us, with bitter sarcasm, to use the traditional gameplay to fight an "enemy" produced by mass media's distorted picture. A few years later, an elusive Italian game studio began a small revolution, arguing that in order to allow games to be a vehicle of ideological systems other than those provided by the game industry ("the yupification of levels"), we needed to rethink the gameplay [3]. The brand name of artist Paolo Pedercini, Molleindustria ("soft", of course, because it made software) was, along with a few others [4], one of the pioneers of so-called "political games," that became expression of an alternative way of thinking about news, religion and sexuality. *Every Day The Same Dream* (2009) goes on along the same path, in a less playful and more lyrical way: the choices are few, the patterns repetitive, as in life.

These three examples might be enough to show the importance, too often neglected, of the contribution of Italian art in the development of critical thinking on digital games. It is not simply a matter of "whodiditfirst". We are not claiming that these artists were the first (or second) to make such statements. We are, however, claiming that the quality of their statements, the validity of their message, was and remains second to none.

Most of the other works on show explore some of the issues first introduced by these early examples. Mauro Ceolin, Marco Cadioli and Damiano Colacito further developed, each in their own ways, Manetas' first insights on the reality of our

experience of the virtual. An experience that leaves traces in our memory and imagination, and for that reason should be documented, portrayed, reproduced. Mauro Ceolin started to focus on game culture in 2002, portraying the game designers who made the history of videogames: faces and names unknown to most people, like Will Wright or Shigeru Miyamoto, that Ceolin celebrates as culture heroes. This first work was followed by the memorable series *SolidLandscapes* (2005 - 2011), in which he painted the landscapes where he lived inside the screen as if they were real. *CARTRIDGEdream* (2005), presented in the exhibition, is a small masterpiece of recycling scrap: old game cartridges, modeling components, and spam emails are reassembled to spawn a new cultural artifact.

Since 2003, Marco Cadioli has been suggesting that virtual environments, from the first graphical chatrooms to massive online role-playing games and virtual worlds, constitute a new level of reality that must be documented, if we don't want to lose a significant part of our personal and collective history. In 2005, he shot his war reportages as an embedded photographer in worlds like *Quake III*, *Enemy Territory* and *Counter-Strike*, of course emulating the gaze of his predecessors on the same risky path, such as Robert Capa.

Finally, Damiano Colacito extracts textures and models from games, giving them form in the real world: weapons, power-ups, and other items occupy a phisical space in which the simulation and the memory of such simulation overlap. Brought back in the real world, these functional objects become alienating, and play tricks to the memory of both gamers and non gamers.

Other artists focus on the introduction, in our visual culture, of the aesthetics, iconography and conventions of videogames: the “game over” screen Les Liens Invisibles pay a tribute to, which is the game counterpart to the cinematographic “the end” referenced in another of their works; or the low-tech aesthetics of 8 bit games explored by TonyLight and VjVISUALLOOP. In *Douche Bag City* (2010), Federico Solmi looks at the narrative conventions of shooter games to tell the story of glory, damnation and fall of Dick Richman, the dark hero of the capitalist dream converted, thanks to himself, into an unprecedeted global economic crisis. But in his ambitious

project, Solmi goes even further, asking his long time collaborator, the New Zealand game designer Russell Lowe, to build an entire world where to stage and relive the parable of Richman. The aesthetics of the shooter game, not simulated but re-created, leads to a paroxysmal extreme the aesthetics of violence developed by Solmi in his drawings for the video animations made in recent years.

Stefano Spera further develops Manetas' research on the contemporary domestic space, reinterpreting it in original ways that allow him to explore the edge between reality and simulation, with sophisticated allusions to metaphysical painting, hyperrealism and other media, such as photography. Santa Ragione and Carlo Zanni explore, in very different ways, the potential of videogame as an artistic medium. The first rediscover, in *Fotonica* (2011), geometric abstraction and the aesthetics of the first 3D simulations, used to design a game focused on traveling and exploring a metaphysical environment. In *Average Shoveler* (2004) the latter uses the videogame as a friendly interface that allows the viewer to navigate through the news, and to resist their repeated attempts to drown him, preventing him from living his own life. But video games are not just cultural artifacts: they are also a culture itself, a cult, a vice and a disease, a new way of living in symbiosis with the machine, and to adapt to it. For this reason, the world of gamers is interesting for artists as much as the world of videogames: in gamers they see, on the one hand, the revival of ancestral patterns, such as that of the mystic and the prayer; and, on the other hand, the prototype of a new stage of evolution (or involution) of the homo sapiens. In the work presented in the exhibition, Eva and Franco Mattes and the collective IOCOSE draw upon these issues. Dying in the game, or being unable to play for technical problems can cause anger and pain. No wonder that, as in *My Generation* (2010), the recent video installation by Eva and Franco Mattes, angry and frustrated gamers freak out in violent outbursts of anger against their computer, the body prosthesis allowing them to live their second life. On the other hand, living in the game can cause psychological and possibly physical damage. IOCOSE's work, produced for the exhibition in collaboration with Matteo Bittanti, turns real this latter situation, living at the moment in the grey zone between medical research and urban legend.

*Italians Do It Better!!* showcases a consistent body of work developed by artists, Italian by birth or by adoption and often, needless to say, better known abroad than in their homeland ; and the beginning of a research that, we hope, will have soon a follow-up.

## Notes

[1] Miltos Manetas, “Copying From Videogames Is The Art Of Our Days”, 2004. Online at [www.manetas.com/txt/videogamesis.html](http://www.manetas.com/txt/videogamesis.html).

[2] In 2010 Lega Nord, the separatist and xenophobic Italian party, presented on its official website *Rimbalza il clandestino*, a viral game in which the player must prevent immigrants to land on the country's shores. Satire was turned into propaganda. In April 2011 Roberto Castelli, deputy minister for the Infrastructures and member of the same party, said: «We must reject the immigrants, but we can't shoot them, at least by now».

[3] Paolo Pedercini, “Lo yuppismo del livello”, November 2004. The essay, no more available, was widely re-used by the author in a later text: Paolo Pedercini, “Radical Game Design”, in *A Minima*, n° 16, February 2006. Available at [www.molleindustria.org/it/radical-game-design](http://www.molleindustria.org/it/radical-game-design).

[4] Molleindustria's first games date back to 2004. Some months before, the Uruguayan game designer Gonzalo Frasca made the first games of political propaganda, and founded the website Newsgaming.com, where he released little Flash games inspired by current political events.