

SOMMERER & MIGNONNEAU

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Text & Interview by Carla Zamora

“A dark room. It contains plants, and there’s a large-format projection in the background. A group of astonished individuals are touching the plants – some cautiously, some shaking them quite vigorously. All are absolutely thrilled by the apparent magic that lets them conjure up a multi-hued digital world of plants right on the room’s wall.”¹

Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau have awakened the curious child in thousands, if not millions of people with their intuitive and dynamic works of art. The two internationally renowned media artists and researchers based in Linz/Austria have been active as an artistic couple since the '90s and have especially pioneered in the field of interactive media art. Their artistic oeuvre and research - which is fully documented and archived on ADA – has an emphasis on exploring the connections of natural and artificial life, but also covers diverse themes such as interaction science, evolutionary design, human and electronic communication, and media archeology. Most of Sommerer & Mignonneau's interactive computer installations are not only rooted in profound scientific principles of natural science, but also explore and offer non-deterministic and multi-layered interaction for the audience, often in a subtle, playful, and also humorous manner by emphasizing collective interaction experiences.

Since 2004 the collective has been sharing their knowledge and expertise as heads of the Master program Interface Cultures at the Kunstuniversität Linz, Austria. Moreover, they have published several books, articles and papers, but also have been mentioned, analyzed and interpreted multiple times by renowned artists, critics, theorists and curators such as

¹ Stocker, Gerfried. In Christa Sommerer - Laurent Mignonneau: Interactive Art Research, edited by Gerfried Stocker (Wien, New York: Springer Verlag, 2009)

Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, Karin Oehlschläger, Gerfried Stocker, Oliver Grau, Peter Weibel, etc.

In 2021 the artistic duo was honored for their life work by receiving the Austrian state arts prize for Media Art.

EXPLORING THE ART OF ARTIFICIAL LIFE

Sommerer originally studied biology (with focus on botany), modern sculpture and art education at the *Academy of Fine Arts* in Vienna. Mignonneau studied Modern Art and Video Art at the *Ecole des Beaux Arts* in Angoulême, France. Independently from each other, in 1991 both were invited by Peter Weibel to study at the Institute for New Media at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. This is how one day Christa and Laurent encountered each other while experimenting in the computer lab. Soon after, they teamed up and right away co-created their pioneering and remarkable debut work **Interactive Plant Growing (1992)**, which laid the foundation for the Interactive Art genre and has been touring the globe ever since.

Back in 1992, where machine-human interaction still wasn't as commonplace as it is today, the audience was invited to touch natural plants as interfaces to let grow virtual plants on a large background projection. As we can imagine, it was a completely new way to approach not only nature, but also technology – and to learn more from both fields. By blurring the border between living beings and interfaces, the artwork *Interactive Plant Growing* allowed the spectators to discover a new form of tangible-visual communication as they could see and transform images created by other people. In other words, the spectators could communicate with each other just like plants do - by means of electronic impulses.

“ This fundamentally involuntary communication, developing on a physiological level between people and plants, at the same time represents the unimaginable plurality of relations which humans can engage in beyond their conscious control, resulting from their biological, technological and biotechnological surroundings.”

(Ryszard Kluszczyński)²

² Kluszczyński, Ryszard W. “From Artificial Ecosystems to Critical Reflection. An Introduction to the Analysis of the Work of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau.” In *Wonderful Life: Laurent Mignonneau + Christa Sommerer* (Gdańsk: Laznia Centre for Contemporary Art, 2012), p. 2

Another outstanding piece that elaborates multi-user interaction and artificial life is **A-Volve from 1994**, which still fascinates young and old alike.³ The themes of creation, recreation, living versus surviving and death can be experienced in real-time by drawing shapes on a touch screen, which are transformed into 3D aquatic creatures and awakened to life within a large virtual aquarium. Based on a system inspired by natural and evolution principles, those creatures can mate, reproduce and even eat each other, depending on their shape and size. During their short lifespan, the creators and viewers can intervene in the spectacle of this artificial ecosystem by holding a hand over the creatures that appear too fast or too strong, in order to rescue the weaker creatures.

“Artificial Life is the study of man-made systems that exhibit behaviors characteristic of natural living systems (...) Artificial Life can contribute to theoretical biology by locating life-as-we-know-it within the larger picture of life-as-it-could-be.”⁴

With regard to contemporary issues such as environmental crisis, climate change and resulting mass extinction of species, works such as **A-Volve (1994)**, **Life Species (1997)**, **Life Writer (2006)**, **Scavengers (2020)**, etc. have a timeless relevance, since they reflect on evolutionary rules in biology and how those are or can be influenced by human-technological interventions.

Especially the notion of care and responsibility for other species and our environment is still thematized in many of Sommerer & Mignonneau's works today. At this point it is also worth mentioning a valuable pedagogical quality, which the collective repeatedly contributes with self-developed artistic-playful applications for children but also for adults, and thus creates more awareness for nature through technology.

“Their works were and are trail-blazing in interactive art and are especially important in creating a connection between artificial life and genetic art. They have succeeded in combining the ideas of the artificial intelligence sciences (...) with the outcomes from the Artificial Life sciences in an artistic manner: a unique achievement. In this manner, they created – after Simon’s Sciences of the Artificial

³ This work was exhibited again in the retrospective exhibition “Art as a Living System” at ZKM Karlsruhe and OK Linz in 2022/2023.

⁴ Langton, Christopher G. “Artificial Life: Proceedings of an interdisciplinary workshop on the synthesis and simulation of living systems” (United States, web publication, Volume VI, 1987) p. 9

– The Art of the Artificial, so to say. This accomplishment was only possible because, in addition to their virtuosity, they also bring deep insight and artistic and philosophical questions into each respective work. (Peter Weibel)⁵

THE FLY AS A METAPHOR FOR MEDIA ART

Insects have a long tradition in art history and found its representations in diverse forms, especially in the sculpture and painting from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The fly as “musca depicta” was attributed various meanings, such as sin, corruption, or mortality or transience, but it was also used for proving originality and mastery of a piece.

In several of Sommerer & Mignonneau’s algorithmically generated works, insect-like creatures, flies and in recent works also ants are repeatedly the main protagonists to be created, fed or rescued through different forms of physical interaction via keyboards, touch screens, scans, but also entirely analog tools such as a torch or a typewriter.

“ By connecting the act of typing to the act of creation of life, Life Writer deals with the idea of creating an open-ended artwork where user-creature and creature-creature interaction become essential to the creation of digital life and where an emergent systems of life-like art emerges on the boundaries between analog and digital worlds.”⁶

Portrait on the Fly (2015), People on the Fly (2016), Fly High – Time Flies (2016), Fly Simulator (2018), etc. – all these works are at first glance fun and easily consumable installations. However, the virtual swarms of thousands of flies in the collective’s “fly works” address on multiple levels the theme of decay and transience in relation to our society, nature, and the artwork itself.

As Sommerer & Mignonneau stated: “In forensic entomology, for example, the fly is used to determine the exact time of death, as it is the earliest insect to infest a corpse and it plays an important role in the decomposition of bodies. We are aware that using the symbolism of the fly in our artwork is rather morbid, it signifies a certain fragility of media art per se.”⁷

In "Portrait on the Fly," which is its own series of works consisting of interactive portraits,

⁵ Weibel, Peter. “The Art of the Artificial” in Christa Sommerer - Laurent Mignonneau: Interactive Art Research, edited by Gerfried Stocker (Wien, New York: Springer Verlag, 2009), p. 16

⁶ Sommerer, C., Mignonneau, L. “Life Writer” URL: <https://digitalartarchive.at/database/general/work/life-writer.html>

⁷ Sommerer, C., Mignonneau, L. “Between Decay and Preservation: A Personal Approach to Media Art Archiving” in Proceedings of the 22nd International Symposium on Electronic Art ISEA2016, Hong Kong. p.206

plotter drawings and video portraits, the artists made use of the idea of the popular selfie filter and deliberately play with the curiosity of the interactor. As soon as a person stands in front of the interactive screen, the buzzing fly swarm forms the shape of the person's contours and facial features. When the person moves on, the fly portrait dissolves again - a critical commentary on the fast-paced life in our contemporary Western society and (narcissistic) selfie culture.

With *Portrait on the Fly*, the artists consciously also thematize the issue of archiving and longevity of their work and media art in general, which is difficult to preserve. As a metaphorical suggestion to capture at least the "essence" of the artworks, they created **plotter drawings** and **video portraits** of renowned pioneer media artists.⁸

The works **ANTopolis (2020)** or **Homo Insectus (2020)** could be seen as further developments and variations of the insect-works, in which the ant swarms shall remind us of the worldwide decline of insects and biodiversity due to pollution and other damaging human interventions. Insects play a crucial function in the ecosystem as pollinators, composters, and most importantly as food source for other animals.

SELF-REFLECTION ON THE SELF-SOCIETY

From the beginning, Sommerer & Mignonneau have taken a playful, experimental approach to their work, that invites for new insights and reflections on artificial life, nature, but also strongly on the self, the way we interact with each other, and ultimately how we communicate.

Humor is also a particular feature of numerous works, such as **Magic Eye - Dissolving Borders (2010)**, which confronts the users with unexpected interactions with an old radio that emits embarrassing sounds that we usually try to hide in public; or the **Egometer (2017)**, which is translated into sympathy scores towards the artists. In **Schall und Rauch (2012)** two users are invited to communicate via vintage telephones. However, inspired by a German proverb meaning "It's all hollow words", the recipient only hears noise instead of intelligible words, which are also accompanied by smoke evaporating from the mouthpiece. What all these works have in common is not only the humorous functions of the devices, but also narratives about media history and how technological developments affect interpersonal, societal, or human-machine interactions and behavior.

Lastly, if we look at works like **Mobile Feelings (2002-03)**, where the human sense of touch

⁸ Sommerer, C., Mignonneau, L. "Portrait on the Fly - Plotter Drawings" URL: <https://digitalartarchive.at/database/general/work/portrait-on-the-fly-plotter-drawings.html>

was of special concern for the artists and expanded into *teletactility*⁹ or telehaptics, many of the early works mentioned above were not without reason described as "epoch making" at the time.

Mobile Feelings II, which was recently exhibited again in the retrospective show "**Art as a Living System**", is an installation for two participants, who can sense the heartbeat and a faint whiff of the breath of each other by using futuristic, egg-like devices. As if one could almost ascribe precognitive abilities to the artist duo, this work takes on a whole new dimension after the events of the past two years and lets us reflect on what Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau intended to convey already 20 years ago: "Given that human communication (...) often also includes unspoken, intuitive and sensual information exchanges, we set out to construct wireless communication devices that would let users communicate in a very intuitive, emotional and private manner. The sense of touch still remains one of our most private sensations for which we still lack a concise descriptive language."¹⁰

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Christa Sommerer's and Laurent Mignonneau's works have been shown in around 250 exhibitions world-wide and are permanently installed in media museums and media collections around the world, including the Media Museum of the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, the NTT-ICC InterCommunication Center in Tokyo, the Cartier Foundation in Paris, the Millennium Dome in London, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Japan, the AEC Ars Electronica Center in Linz, Austria, the NTT Plan-Net in Nagoya, Japan, Shiroishi Multimedia Art Center in Shiroishi, Japan and the HOUSE-OF-SHISEIDO in Tokyo. In 2022 Sommerer & Mignonneau were awarded and honored for their life work with the Austrian state prize for Media Arts.

⁹ Kluszczyński, Ryszard W. "From Artificial Ecosystems to Critical Reflection. An Introduction to the Analysis of the Work of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau." In *Wonderful Life: Laurent Mignonneau + Christa Sommerer* (Gdańsk: Laznia Centre for Contemporary Art, 2012), p. 3

¹⁰ Sommerer, C., Mignonneau, L. "Mobile Feelings" in *Christa Sommerer - Laurent Mignonneau: Interactive Art Research*, edited by Gerfried Stocker (Wien, New York: Springer Verlag, 2009), p. 203

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTA SOMMERER & LAURENT MIGNONNEAU:

Christa and Laurent, let's start with a more personal question. You met at the Städelschule Institute for New Media in Frankfurt in 1991 and you have been working, living, creating, thinking together ever since. What did you essentially learn from each other over all those years?

C+L: This is a very good question. I think when one works in a team for so many years, one starts to understand the other partner quite well, what he/she likes, what he/she finds interesting and how he/she artistically works. What we like, that even when you know the other artistic partner well, there are always lots of surprises and unexpected propositions coming up. If one of us proposes a new idea then we sit together and negotiate these ideas together, whether it is Laurent's idea or Christa's. Sometimes you have to fight for your idea, because at the end of the day we only realize a project when we are both convinced that it is a good idea. There is also some trust you develop over the years, because you know the capacity of the other and already have an intuition of what she/he means and what she/he plans to do.

What is the exciting or most interesting moment when you transform natural systems or biological behaviors into your digital environments?

C: It is this moment when you see something abstract but still life-like. It vaguely reminds you to a feature in nature, for example some swarming, some movement or some natural phenomena. But it can also be something more conceptual, that challenges our vision, our perception or our sensation about art and nature.

L: For me, it is the moment when you realize that you get carried away with the amount of possibilities, that you will not experience all the aspects of some of the works, especially the ones that involve evolution as their core principle.

Randomness and unpredictability play an important role in your artworks. Why?

C: There is a lot of randomness, or shall we say mutations in nature. There is not one plant, animal or human that looks exactly the same as any other. Nature is full of variations and individuality. Even stones are unique, you will hardly find exactly the

same stone. One might ask why nature puts all this effort into creating so many variations. This is absolutely fascinating and in our artworks, we like to work with this variability and unpredictability.

L.: I have been working with randomness since a long time as an artist, even before we met. I used randomness for music algorithmic compositions on computers in the 80's and for sound generation, I also used it for live improvisations with electronic and physical instruments as well as for effects on my artistic video production. I have a long history with randomness in the art field and it took all its sense when I worked with algorithms dealing with genetic principles. Randomness in itself has not a particular form, it is only through managing it and filtering it in time and space that it can help for the elaboration of a form, whether it is for a sound, a shape, a picture or an event. Natural evolution uses randomness a lot for acquiring new possibilities, it is an opportunistic principle that memorizes those random factors to carry them further in time, leading to unpredictable paths, and the beauty of it is that it remains unarbitrary.

Many of your works, if not all of them, have a playful character and some are even very humorous and funny. Do you “plan in” the playfulness and humor or does it come naturally when you conceptualize new works? How is the process of conceptualizing a funny, entertaining, or playful artwork?

C: Yes, we like it when people who interact with our works feel good and play with them. However, playfulness is not the main goal. Through interacting, people "enter" the artworks, they co-create them and the bodily engage with them. In this way they also might get closer to understanding the concept of the work. For us it is very satisfying to see how people engage with the artworks and how they "bring them to life."

L: Interactivity is never neutral, there is on the one hand the intensions of the artists and the perception of the visitors and both at play at the same time. Our intensions include a large part of discovery, curiosity with eventual surprises left for the visitors, having some humoristic elements in the works can contribute to this exploration as a friendly encouragement to interact further.

Together you established the Master program Interface Cultures at the University for Art and Design in Linz, Austria, in 2004 and you were the leading duo ever since. Christa will be the first one to leave this era behind early this year. After almost 20 years teaching Media Art and Digital Art, could you briefly describe some

observations you had over the years? How did the technology change and influence the art students and their topics over time?

C: This is also a good question, and I am still pondering upon it. For the moment I can say that when we started the Interface Cultures Department in 2004, many colleagues did not have a very good opinion about media art. For them making art with computers was too geeky, too technophile and not "real art". It was mostly because they lacked the experience working with digital tools and digital media. This was at a time when few people had computers and it was also long before the mobile phones became omnipresent. Since the last 10 years a lot of things have changed in the art context and now almost everyone in the arts is using digital tools as well. Now it is normal to combine various analogue techniques with digital techniques, methods and tools. This has really given a great push to media art, and these types of programs are firmly integrated in the curriculum now. Also, people in the arts start to get more accustomed to interactivity, VR, AR and other digital art tools and methods. So, in a way it is great to have been involved to trailblaze a new art genre at the University of Art in Linz and see how it prospers and grows and matures. From a small baby in 2004, the Interface Cultures Department, has now turned into an almost adult teenager, who keeps growing and develops its own agenda and style. We can see now so many hybrid projects by the students, be it AI and art, bio-tech and art, VR, AR and art, gaming and art, fashionable technologies and art, Critical Data Art, stage-based interaction and performance art and many, many more. The possibilities seem almost endless and it is so exciting to see what young artists and creators are working on right now.

From 2020 to 2024 Interface Cultures is part of the research project "LeFo" together with a team from the Center of Image Science at the University for Continuing Education in Krems. For this project you have two big goals - one is to fully archive and document your oeuvre and research on ADA, and the other is to create a prototype for an alternative virtual archive experience, which was mainly developed by your colleague Tiago Martins. What were the most interesting and insightful moments during the archiving and developing process for you and your team?

C+L: The LeFo project is really a great opportunity to digitize our big archive of media art which we have assembled over the past 30 years. We have scanned around 300 books and exhibition brochures since 1992. Many of them are not available on the Internet and only exist in a printed form. To make them available in the ADA Archive of Digital Art will give scholars access to these types of early beginnings of media art. The documents will show how this scene developed from a small group of insiders and a few

festivals into a much bigger community of digital arts as we have it now. Scanning, sorting and archiving these materials is a great way of looking back at this history and it will be a great source for media art scholars to research on topics that are still very valid today. As for the Ar(t)chive AR Prototype that Tiago Martins developed with us, we are happy about how it is perceived so far in the two exhibitions we had at the ZKM in Karlsruhe and at the OK Center in Linz. Here we saw that people are getting ready to navigate through large amounts of data in an Augmented Reality setting. In the future we want to connect the prototype to the actual ADA Archive and then users can navigate through the archive very intuitively: using their hand gestures and full body to explore media art, artists, topics, images, texts, sounds and all their interconnections in a playful and entertaining way. Especially when observing young people using the system, we feel that AR will be the future for these types of media art archives.

What are your plans for the near future? Do you work on new projects?

C+L: For the moment we are concentrating on planning the next two stations of our big traveling retrospective show. In April 2023 "The Artwork as a Living System" will be exhibited at iMAL in Brussels, and we already plan the next station at Azkuna Zentroa in Bilbao in early 2024. Besides that, there are a few shows coming up as well and some travels. As for new projects, we are working on an online garden project for this summer. I will also take some time to go back into plant studies and plant drawings, one of my passions I did not have time to follow up. And of course gardening will also be given more space and time.

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The Archive of Digital Art team thanks Christa & Laurent not only for their contributions to the world of media art, but also for their longstanding partnership, friendship and collaboration. The archiving of all their work documentation was made possible under the umbrella of the joint research project "LeFo" and through the amazing archiving work of Interface Culture students Lea Schnell and Barbara Jazbec. Last but not least, we would also like to thank Tiago Martins, who developed a fascinating prototype for a virtual archive. The result is the HoloLens-based work-in-progress called "**Ar(t)chive**".