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Transfer: out of the browser, into the gallery space

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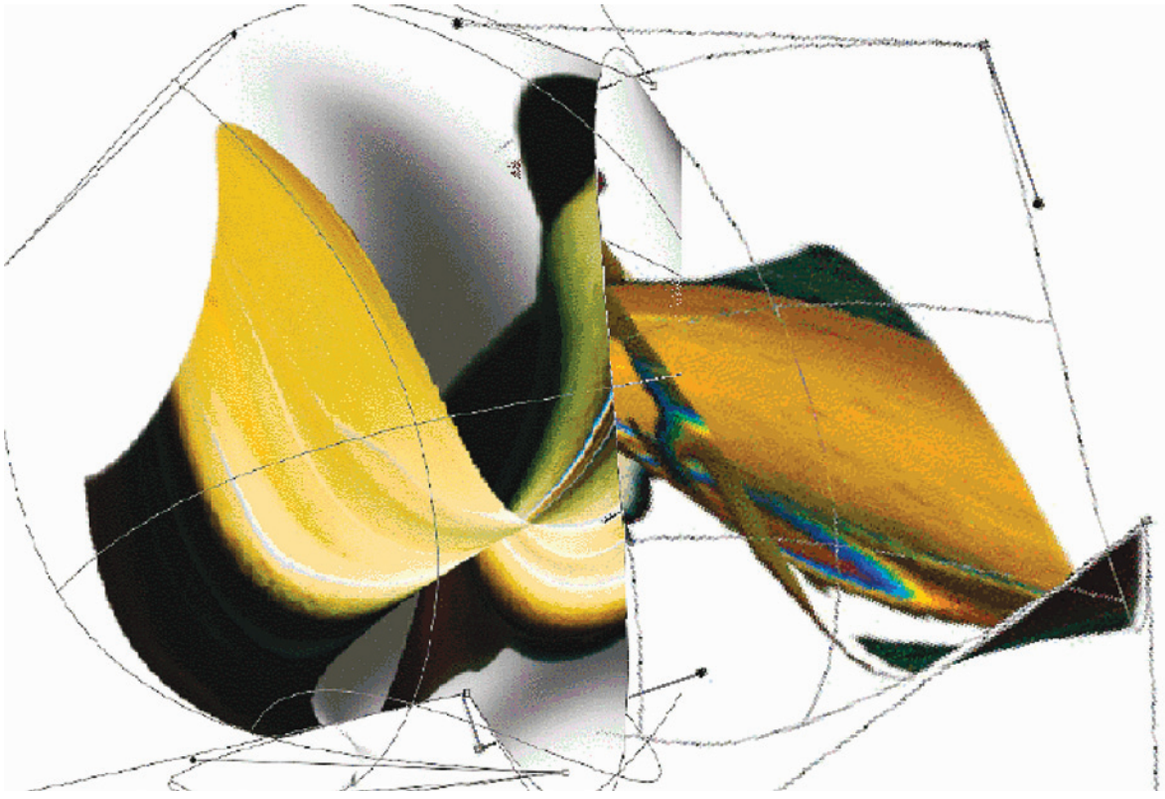
Rollin Leonard, still from *360° / Lilia 18*, 2013. 16:9 video.
Courtesy of the artist and Transfer.



Lorna Mills, still from *Double Dulce*,
2013. Animated gif; 1280 x 800 pixels.
Courtesy of the artist and Transfer.

TRANSFER: OUT OF THE BROWSER, INTO THE GALLERY SPACE

TRANSFER (transfergallery.com) is a young New York gallery that has developed an outstanding trajectory in a little more than a year. Directors Kelani Nichole (www.kelaninichole.com), curator and digital product strategist, and Jereme Mongeon (www.jerememongeon.com), content strategist and online marketing specialist, opened the gallery in Brooklyn, in March 2013, to support artists working on the Internet by offering them a physical space where they could exhibit their projects. Exploring "the friction between networked practice and its physical instantiation," TRANSFER has participated in international art fairs and established collaborations with galleries in Europe. Twenty years after the first artistic projects were conceived for the World Wide Web, a new generation of artists is eager to move from the screen to the gallery space.

Transfer started as a gallery that takes online art into a physical space. What generated this particular interest in bringing net art to the white cube?

Kelani had developed a curatorial practice in Philadelphia that was mainly related to screen-based work. She worked with many artists that she met online and thought that they could expand their practice if they took their art into a physical space. The artists were excited to have a gallery space so they started to create new work, and this became the impetus behind the whole project. We opened the space in New York after about four months. The media and artist response has been overwhelmingly positive.

Being able to show artworks online, free from art institutions or the market, was the utopia of net art in the 90s. But now it seems artists need the gallery space, after all…

Yes, there is still a lot of traditionalism caught up with this. We're not saying that the white cube makes the artworks more valuable, it's just a different environment. What is made online should stay online, and we think that if the artwork belongs in a browser, it probably doesn't belong in our gallery because anyone could look at it anywhere. We think that it would be a little pretentious to put an online piece on a white wall and expect people to come look at it in a web browser. So, it's an area of conceptual struggle for us: we try to put together a coherent program, but we also challenge the artists because they have to think of how to translate their ideas into the physical space, and sometimes this leads to a different kind of artwork.

To what extent are the physical artworks derivative of their net-based artworks? Do the artists conceive their pieces in terms of the art market?

It depends on the artist. Some artists have a very broad interdisciplinary practice; they work with video as well as performance art, for instance, and they move very easily into the gallery space. They have a clear idea of what they want to do, and it may not be related to their online practice. On the other hand, we have people like Rollin Leonard, who established a very clear connection between his online practice and the work he presented in the gallery, although I would not call it derivative, because there is enough uniqueness in the way the online work was physically instantiated.

The artists we work with generally don't think about the art market, which is not to say they are not savvy about it. We are an emerging art gallery working with emerging artists, so most of them are less concerned with sales and more interested in having a show. We sometimes talk about it but we don't reject an artwork just because it won't be marketable. We try not to be in a position where we need to sell art, although of course we're not opposed to selling. But the gallery is not our main source of income: we work professionally in other fields, which is how we afford to run this space.

There is a certain taboo in openly admitting that your objective is to sell art, although that is one of the main roles of an art gallery.

Yes, it's considered in poor taste to be too commercial, but at the same time galleries in general are businesses. Businesses need to make money, and artists need to get paid so they can mature their practice. The worst thing that can happen is that an artist gives up because they make more money somewhere else. As gallery owners, we are always trying to do the best for the work and the artists, while trying not to go crazy into debt. You have to walk a thin line. But it is not only an economic investment; we are investing in the historical moment and in ourselves, in fact, in our own development as people.

Who is your target audience?

Right now it seems to be a small amount of people. We are trying to see who the collecting audience is. In our limited experience, we have found that most people interested in new media art have a somewhat experimental taste, or they want to bet on the future appreciation of these artworks. In terms of a broader audience, it tends to be young people, a very diverse group, which are used to consuming and producing media content.

There seems to be a renewed interest in digital art in the art market, partly thanks to the much advertised and controversial "Post-Internet" label. What is your opinion about this?

We try to avoid these labels, but they inevitably creep into the discussion as attempts to sort out the new tendency that is coming into view in the contemporary art world right now. Before we even opened our doors we were labelled a "Net Art" gallery and our programming was aligned with various similar labels such as "New Aesthetic" and "Glitch." "Post–Internet" is another label and one with which Marisa Olson has done some interesting work (we're delighted to be hosting her solo exhibition at our space in 2015), and I have been quite inspired by a recent exhibition from Karen Archey and Robin Peckham at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing titled "Art Post-Internet." This is a long answer to say we are sympathetic to the reasons these labels are being applied to today's avant-garde, but believe they are limiting when they function as faddish indicators for work that deserves much more serious critical discourse.

You have participated in the UNPAINTED Media Art Fair. Is it more convenient for you to participate in a specialized art fair than in a conventional art fair?

This fair experience was a pivotal moment for us. It was our second fair, but our first booth with walls (Moving Image—a specialty fair for mediated/screen-based works—was our first). At UNPAINTED we tested out new formats and learned a great deal by being surrounded by so many European dealers and collectors. This is where we became friendly with XPO Gallery and realized that their program and ours are kindred spirits. This relationship has continued to develop, and now we have a partnership that represents some shared objectives as regards the market for artworks in the digital age.

Rick Silva, still from *Render Garden*, 2014. Realtime 3D application. Courtesy of the artist and Transfer.

In terms of the technical requirements of the artworks, do you have to invest in equipment, or do the artists bring their own?

It depends. We don't really work with artworks that are very technologically focused per se. Our artists use digital technology as part of their cultural background, so the equipment they use is what anyone might use every day. We usually need flat screens, sometimes computer screens or tablets, but since our main focus is the physical instantiation much of the work we show in our gallery is in more traditional formats: prints, sculpture, assemblage, and so on.

And these are usually produced by the artists themselves?

Typically, yes. When there is something a little more technologically aggressive, it's usually the artist who does it. For instance, Carla Gannis did a projection map piece in her show *<legend></legend>* and she figured out all the software components. We usually assist the artists as much as we can, and in most cases we haven't had anything so challenging that we couldn't figure out.

Isn't there a bit of fetishism in the conception of the artwork as an object?

First there is the pragmatic aspect of it: we need to have some way of delivering the artwork and maybe it is just common sense to make the delivery mechanism elegant somehow. You know, it is art after all. In terms of fetishism: yes, it is a fair criticism anytime you do something with objects. Obviously, there are some traditional aspects of the art market that may never change. People still want the precious object, they still want scarcity, something we deal with when we are working with objects that can be almost infinitely and identically reproduced. It is a difficult issue that hasn't been solved yet. We are constantly in dialogue with our artists and with other galleries about it, and with collectors too. It is an ongoing conversation.

Why did you decide to set up an online store? What advantages will it bring?

The online store is an experiment in soft launch. You can visit and purchase, but we are still working out how to support the process before mass-promoting the offering. The store was launched to offer international access to items and publications from TRANSFER and our artists, in larger editions at a lower price point. Many artists are collecting their contemporaries and online distribution makes sense to support this aspect of the practice, reaching an international audience of peers and young collectors. Nothing in the store is over $1000 and works are generally in large editions of 25+. TRANSFER maintains a separate inventory of work available for acquisition by collectors.

What direction will Transfer take in the next few years?

We are signing a three-year lease, and we will continue to invest in our space to activate computer-based practices in aggressive physical encounters with viewers. Market activity has always been secondary to our intention; this is shifting in some ways, but we're eager to preserve the artist-first spirit in which the space was conceived. We've been working closely with a number of our artists to define a new mode of support together—first with Lorna Mills and Rollin Leonard, then with Rick Silva with our debut of new work at UNPAINTED, and with Daniel Temkin who we presented during Frieze week in NYC. Also, Clement Valla is the first artist we're partnering with XPO Gallery to share inventory and connect practices across a trans-Atlantic space, NYC <--> INTERNET <--> PARIS. A second collaboration with Rollin Leonard will be opening in all three spaces simultaneously in 2015.

Pau Waelder