Antoine Schmitt - City lights orchestra (2012)
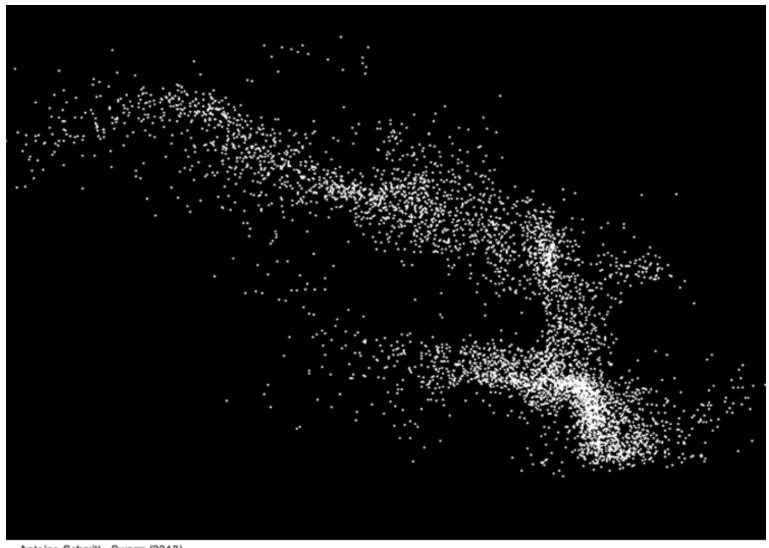
LET THE SOFTWARE MOVES. INTERVIEW WITH ANTOINE SCHMITT

I remember the first time I read *The Language of New Media* (2001) by Lev Manovich I was struck by a reflection: he claimed that in the field of the so-called new media there was a strange dynamic that led engineers to create works of art before artists – it was as if during the Renaissance the apprentices, who physically produced the pigments and prepared the instruments as assistants, worked on paintings and frescoes instead of the artists themselves.

This observation often came back to my mind while studying the works of **Antoine Schmitt, a French artist who started working as a programming engineer** and came to contemporary art only after several years.

His works consist mainly in softwares that he creates which focus on the concept of movement and the dynamic interactions between human nature and the nature of reality: the aspect of programmed art is absolutely central in works such as ***Pixel Noir* (2010)** displaying a moving shape constituted of a flock of

videoprojected white pixels inhabits the whole surface of a white wall but shows a compulsive attraction for a black square painting hung at its center, without ever being able to penetrate it; or **Doors++ (2013)** in which an algorithm continues to generate doors according to certain criteria defined with the sculptor **Patrice Belin**.

Antoine Schmitt - Swarm (2013)

[(http://www.digicult.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Schmitt2.png)](http://www.digicult.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Schmitt2.png)

Filippo Lorenzin: You originally worked as programming engineer in human computer relations and artificial intelligence. How did you pass from this job to contemporary art?

Antoine Schmitt: I fell in love with programming when I was 16, with the idea of writing something that would later act on the world. I became an engineer and then led a quite significant programming engineer career, ending up in the Silicon Valley working in **Steve Jobs' NeXT company**. But somehow I felt frustrated as creativity was only directed toward usefulness; I felt limited. I discovered the world of art through my artist friends and it felt like a bowl of fresh air. In 1994, at the age of 33, I quit my job, returned to France and decided to become an artist. I tried many materials and medium like painting, drawing, photography, video…

But I realized that the fastest way for me to go from an idea to its realization was to use the material that I used intuitively, that is programming. Programming became my main material. I continued to work as a programming consultant for a few years until I could live on my artistic activity thus being able to devote

all my time to it.

Filippo Lorenzin: In your works, movement is a key element. Why are you so fascinated by it?

Antoine Schmitt: Like many artists, I address the issues that trouble me most. Movement and its qualities have always questioned me. Why do I move? Why do things move? Decisions, choices, urges, behaviors, relationships, freedom, destiny, consciousness, laws of physics, laws of the universe… I have long addressed these issues through reading: psychology, philosophy, social science, fundamental physics, etc. And when I became an artist, I started to address these questions through my artworks. Not to provide solutions, but to ask questions. More questions. I do this by creating artworks that move by themselves, letting the spectator feel empathy towards the situation that he sees. Or I question the spectator's own movement, through interactivity for example. I tend to focus on the reasons behind moving and on the shapes that these movements take.

I am interested in special movements, movements that retain the attention, movements that reflect an inner struggle or tension. I am interested in the causes of movement, the forces behind the action. These forces may be physical as the universe is a dynamic force field, psychological as the human *psyché* is a fluid and unstable mechanism, social as societies are complex systems at work. And we are crossed by all these unknown and unknowable energies.

Antoine Schmitt

Filippo Lorenzin: Software is another important element in your work: could you tell the usual creative and practical process behind your projects?

Antoine Schmitt: Programs are great materials to address issues such as movement, and especially the causes of movement since it acts by itself. Any process, machinery or system that one can imagine can be executed by a computer program as long as it can be thoroughly described. This is the definition of the universal machine by Alan Turing, which then became the computer. This means that I can imagine any situation and then just make it happen. This is how I work: I have a vision of a delicate situation, usually after following a certain thread of thought or being touched by a certain real life situation, and I program it. I re-create the situation in a software.

The programming stage is very fast and intuitive, so this phase is usually quite short. Then I play around with the system at work, I fine tune it until a certain tension appears, until the delicate situation is there. Programs are like clay for me. Sometimes I make mistakes and new situations arise, which may be interesting and I keep them. Sometimes I know exactly what I want to achieve and I focus on it. Often, I create systems that do no work at an artistic level so I drop them.

Antoine Schmitt and Delphine Doukhan - Fractal Film (2013)

(http://www.digicult.it/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Schmitt5.png)

Filippo Lorenzin: You worked also on numerous public art works. How would you describe those experiences?

Antoine Schmitt: The contemporary art world is very interesting as it builds on the whole Art History, it is a very intellectual world. But it has its limits also, as the audience is reduced. Public art is very fulfilling as it allows me to reach a very large audience, and it is an audience that may not have an artistic background. Being able to change the point of view of people that do not expect it is a great endeavor and a major satisfaction. And it does not mean dropping intellectual rigor.

My latest public artwork is called *City Lights Orchestra* **(2012)** and relies exclusively on public participation: people light up their home window through their computer screen displaying a specific blinking program, thus joining all the other participants in the neighborhood, leading to a visual symphony of city windows that can be admired while wandering in the streets. Through this artwork, people both participate in a work of art and live their neighborhood in a different way: more aesthetic, more global and more relational (http://www.citylightsorchestra.net/ (http://www.citylightsorchestra.net/)).

01:27

Filippo Lorenzin: What are your plans for the future? What're you working on these months?

Antoine Schmitt: Many of my artworks, public art, performances, installations continue to live their oen life and I am taking care of this, which takes a lot of time and energy. Then I have new performance projects starting, I continue to work with my gallery (**Galerie Charlot in Paris**) to produce and inject new works in the contemporary art world through art fairs and a solo show scheduled for March 2015, I have some commissions for public art to think about, and a few collaborations with cinemas and theatres. And I really feel like taking a break to nourish my soul!

http://www.antoineschmitt.com/ (http://www.antoineschmitt.com/)