

Lanfranco Aceti 2011/2012

IN CONVERSATION WITH

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

2011

The 2011 calendar of **Lanfranco Aceti**, who teaches at **Sabanci University, Istanbul**, and is visiting professor at **Goldsmiths College, University of London**, and works as an artist and curator, is marked, above all, by two big projects: the artistic direction of the 17th edition of **ISEA** and the re-launching of the **Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA)**.

It's easy to realize – especially for those who work in the field - that we are talking about two of the most important projects at the intersection of art, science, technology and communication.

From the 14th to the 21st September 2011, Istanbul will host the **International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA), 17th edition**. Lanfranco Aceti steers this macro event where hundreds of proposals in different formats will come together. If on the one hand the symposium's academic aspect strives to remain ISEA's fulcrum - thanks to a broad selection of panels and paper sessions - on the other hand we can find many different happenings and gatherings like workshops, screenings, discussion forums and networking events: e.g. inside an hammam or on those ferries that every day cross the Bosphorus. The relationship of ISEA2011 with the city of Istanbul, with its rhythms and its special features, seems to be very deep. There is no intention to create a neutral and flat event, but an occasion where the participation, the collaboration and the harmony between the participants and the city develop in a fluent way. The collaboration with the Istanbul Biennial, with no doubt, is an highlight to point out.

The other challenge on which **Lanfranco Aceti** is working at the moment is the **Leonardo Electronic Almanac (LEA)**'s re-launching. With the first issue just released and one more in preparation, Aceti and his collaborators want to re-launch LEA as a very ambitious project: a platform that goes beyond the notion of magazine, but that can function as a center of aggregation and research as well.

In the midst of these projects' organization, **Lanfranco Aceti** - that I warmly thank - has managed to cut out a space of time to accord me this interview.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: Let's start with you: **Lanfranco Aceti is an artist, curator and new media theorist that works between Istanbul and London. The moving through disciplines and different cities is a constant in our actual time. What's your personal experience?**

Lanfranco Aceti: I'm a son of globalization. A lot of people may think of this in a negative way, but there are a lot of interesting aspects to globalization and one of these is that it favors people's empowerment. I'm from Cassino, Italy, a city that was destroyed during the Second World War and for this reason it hasn't a particular urban connecting fabric. I have always felt trapped in the environment of this little provincial town and when I was 14 I began to travel. First I went to Great Britain and once I returned realized that the world was bigger than previously thought. This gave me a sense of what was possible and made me understand that there is nothing that a person can't do

with hard work. And that it is possible to achieve one's dreams.

Today there are many emerging countries - those once that were defined as the economies of the third world - where there is a young generation that wants to achieve their dreams. This is the same drive that Italy had in the Sixties and that now seem to have been lost. Looking at things from this part of the world, from Istanbul, it seems that Europe is in a decadent phase that is not only economic, but primarily cultural. I'm getting more convinced of this everyday.

I can say that the fact of leaving Italy and moving to different countries has been more an obligation than a personal choice. My city of adoption is London and I feel, in a sense, more loyal to Great Britain than Italy. What's the reason? Because my Ph.D. and my studies have been financed by Great Britain and not Italy. Istanbul also plays a big part in my life since I have lived in the city for over four years and have met some wonderful people.

In the context of today's global phenomena what I can say is that the transition and displacement between different cities - I have lived between Boston, New York, London, Glasgow, Rome and Istanbul - has become a part of me. I have taken from Italy the cultural heritage, the capacity to move and think in a creative way, formalist structures from well-defined exercises e.g. Latin and Greek in school, the architectural environments... but was also influenced



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by all the other places I have lived in. The sum of all these experiences shapes the person that I am. The global world is changing, there is Internet, digital media, the fast displacements between cities and a different and more intense competition. I always say to my students that they have to choose at which level they want to compete. I have always desired to compete at an international level and achieve goals in that arena.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: Among your several activities, in addition to the ISEA artistic direction that we will come back to, we find you as *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* (LEA)'s Editor in Chief as well. What are the history and goals of LEA?

Lanfranco Aceti: The re-launch of LEA has been an uphill battle. The magazine was going in a wrong direction and there was an international level competition to bring back this magazine from the comatose situation in which it was. Just in the period when I arrived to Istanbul, there was the call for the new LEA Editor in Chief. While I was preparing the LEA proposal, I applied to host ISEA at Sabanci University as well. I thought that the most important outcome from the synergies developed from both projects (ISEA

and LEA) was to ensure a long lasting legacy. I wanted to ensure that after 2011 LEA would not be 'just a magazine' (there is already a variety of magazines like *Rhizome*, *Digicult*, *Neural*, that offer big contributions and are shaping contemporary electronic art at an international stage) but a project that developed a different academic forum at the intersection of art, science and technology.

I wanted to realize a magazine that works first as a research and aggregation center and then as a publication. Finally this is taking shape. LEA will offer the possibility to create a series of high quality outputs, not only with **ISEA** (with the support of **Sabanci University Goldsmiths**) but also through future collaborations with international partners (museums, artists, universities, etc.).

We presented, through the LEA Digital Platform curated by Vince Dziekan, Christiane Paul and myself, a series of curated exhibitions online. Simultaneously, we will have a physical exhibition space at **Kasa Gallery** Istanbul, to complement the online shows with their physical manifestations.



So, thanks to these elements, we will have a vast articulate structure that should continue to flourish - after ISEA - and make important contributions to research in cultural studies, curatorial studies and fine arts.

There will be the possibility, at an artistic, technologic and critical level, to realize exhibitions - online and in physical galleries - as well as create opportunities for research and collaborations with a range of departments, universities and artistic organizations like **FACT** Liverpool, **MoMA**, **Friesland**, **Arts Council** in Australia or other art organizations Singapore, China and Latin America.

The **Leonardo Electronic Almanac** has required two years of hard work, not only in creating the magazine itself - the creative work, the editorial work, etc. - but also in the administration and in negotiating between a range of partnering institutions. We have had inherited problems, legal and regarding copyright, that we have fortunately overcome. I can say that LEA has been both a professional and a personal conquest.

The first issue of the revamped LEA, *Mish Mash*, is just online and the second, I can tell you as a preview, will be a special issue with **Simon Penny**. My goal is to produce 4 issues every year, plus the catalogs. It's important to say that there is a core team in **Leonardo Electronic Almanac** that has worked and continues to work hard. There are also a lot of people that gravitate, that have collaborated and that support us. In particular there are two people that deserve a special mention for having worked above and beyond the call of duty: **Özden Şahin**, **Deniz Cem Önduygu**.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: To assume the artistic direction of ISEA2011 means to assume a role of great responsibility. What's the right way to face this assignment and how do you face it?

Lanfranco Aceti: You need a lot of patience, attention to detail and flexibility. One of the things I wanted to do is bring a large international event on digital and electronic arts to Istanbul and have it be officially linked to the Istanbul Biennial. The fact that the exhibition **Uncontainable** and the many other initiatives of **ISEA2011** will be part of the 12th Istanbul Biennial Official Parallel Program is a great achievement. There has been a break between the digital arts and the fine arts and I want to put them together again, I want to delete the definitions based on the instrument/medium and to look forward to what the common component is: the artistic element.

I did not want to present a marginalized digital and electronic arts exhibition and symposium, but instead wanted to provide the opportunity for a reciprocal new engagement and recognition within the fine art structure itself. This collaborative engagement was my primary goal. There is also the intention to promote electronic artists to curators, international press, collectors and audiences in attendance during the Biennial.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: ISEA2011 proposes itself as a macro-event that goes beyond the classic academic symposium. Not only panels and paper sessions, but also expositions, workshops, projections, discussion forums, and even a networking event on a boat cruising the Bosphorus. Which ideas and parameters did you follow to build ISEA2011?

Lanfranco Aceti: Madness! The truth is that I sat down and I wondered: I have been to innumerable events, conferences, etc., what do I want to achieve every time I am in attendance? And the answer has been: I feel glad every time I return home and that there

are new projects to realize, new contacts that have been established, exchanges of ideas with new people and the possibility to develop future collaborations, research, exhibitions, etc. with them. So we have said that these are the most important points that we have to realize and for two years we have fought for that. What we want is an event that can give rise to future developments for the delegates. Obviously the fact that it's in Istanbul favors us. The city has a very special charm that can only enhance our hard work.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: The 17th ISEA edition takes place in the Mediterranean city of Istanbul. A city in a constant movement and in a continuous geopolitical, economical, cultural and artistic growth. We must remind to the reader, as we said, that ISEA2011 coincides with the opening of the Istanbul Biennial. What kind of relationship has been established between ISEA, Istanbul and what the city offers?

Lanfranco Aceti: I have to say that we managed to do what I would never have imagined. We managed to move fluidly through the barriers and definitions, between Islam and secularism. We have ignored these constrictions and stereotypes and worked with everybody to realize a big event. The city has responded in kind. Istanbul is a wonderful city and what we have tried to do was to work with the city, with both its limitations and the fascinating elements that characterize it. I believe that this will give to the participants of ISEA a different view of the city, beyond its traditional stereotypes. Istanbul is expanding, with huge skyscrapers and rows of new constructions.

The fact that I also work as director of Kasa Gallery – with its great tradition and history – has allowed me to develop an international exhibition program.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: ISEA represents one of the world events of major interest in the electronic and digital art field. What news or surprises do we have to expect in Istanbul? What's new from an aesthetic and formal point of view that Istanbul and ISEA can give us about contemporary artistic practices?

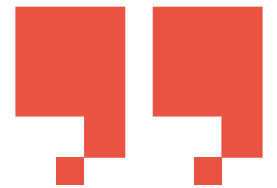
Lanfranco Aceti: There are several innovations and fundamental changes that are happening in the city. I do not expect that new aesthetics will be created, but perhaps the new approaches that will come from Istanbul will be based on its tradition of re-combinatory possibilities and unusual collages of ideas, concepts and technologies that escape traditional definitions. In Istanbul there is a contemporary usage of technology that surpasses many other places in the Mediterranean. The city will be able to offer clues on the great impact that technology is having and on how it is changing cultural attitudes and therefore aesthetic perceptions. This I believe will be an important outcome.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: Hundreds of people will participate in ISEA2011. What are the strategies for the papers' publications and in which way do you think to materialize the results of this intense week of the symposium?

Lanfranco Aceti: We are preparing two, or more, catalogs. All the papers will be published and we are getting ready to transfer them to online platforms like Kindle, Amazon, iTunes, etc. This is an electronic art symposium and the fact that the publications of the previous editions are not available electronically for me has always been a big problem and it's what we want to avoid this time. The rest will depend on the participants' willingness to produce outcomes. We are preparing the proceedings, catalogs and then there will be the special editions of the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* on particular themes of interest i.e. robotics, censorship, Mediterranean, emigration, new forms of education.



This is a sharing structure that can help to open and widen the circle of academic collaborations and open new possibilities for production of academic outputs at an international level.



Every panel, forum, etc. will have the possibility to submit for a special issue of the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*. I want to offer the possibility to have senior editors, editors and junior editors involved in these issues, focusing on young researchers who are at the beginning of their academic careers. They will be able to participate, work and learn together with other people who are more experienced editors and academics.

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Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: ISEA2012 is expected in the United States. How do you see the future of research, study, artistic creativity, of relationship between art, technology, science and communication in this moment of global crisis and heavy cuts to culture? Will we survive?

Lanfranco Aceti: Ovviamente. Of course, we will survive. There are no doubts. We will survive if

we have teeth and claws and fight in an intelligent manner the battles that have to be faced. I'm not at all a pessimist, I am a realist. We had to make difficult choices for ISEA - because of the global crisis. But I have to say that the strategy we have chosen to adopt has worked successfully. In the last *Leonardo Electronic Almanac* editorial, I wrote that today we need more to attack than to resist. We need to move the world of art, science and technology towards a new series of partnerships, synergies and collaborations. What's important is not to be dependent on public funds. It is no longer possible to think that to realize change it is possible to simply wait for financing and support from beleaguered institutions. If you want to implement change one needs to face the difficulties in a realistic way, conscious that there will be battles, but also knowing that these battles can be won. I do not believe that, in times like this, it is possible to survive by sitting on a chair and writing a couple of critiques online. I believe the only way to win the battle is by 'doing something' and that by being proactive and evolving we can ensure that the arts continue not only to grow but to thrive.

2012

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: *A year is gone by and I have a question, ISEA2011 Istanbul was a success, 1500 attendees, over 100 artists, 90 panels, 70 workshops, hundreds of papers, what is happening now?*

Lanfranco Aceti: Well, thanks to the support of Kasa Gallery we have completed the catalog, over 400 pages, which will be available on Amazon for international distribution. The catalog will also be available in small PDF sections online on the *Leonardo Electronic Almanac*. The proceedings are also appearing and we have finished formally with ISEA.

Now there are a series of new initiatives that we are launching. LEA has a strong publication outcome that during 2013 will see a wide range of publications. We are publishing volumes that are around 200 pages each, like *Touch and Go* for example in collaboration with Kasa Gallery, Sabanci University, Goldsmiths College and other organizations. I have also been able to develop a new research center, Operational and Curatorial Research (OCR) in contemporary art, design, science and technology and the Museum of Contemporary Cuts (MoCC).

The research center is going to be developing an ambitious art agenda of international collaborations. I believe this is perhaps the real legacy of ISEA - it gave me the perspective to develop a new ambitious collaborative agenda and to adopt hybrid models that are functional to the art world and its economics today.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This interview has been previously published on DigiCult's project journal *Digimag* Issue 67 (September 2011): <http://www.digicult.it/en/digimag/issue-067/lanfranco-aceti-lea-isea-and-other-challenges>.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: *Talking about an ambitious art agenda, what is the trend that you are setting as director of Kasa Gallery?*

Lanfranco Aceti: I wish to have artworks that are exciting, original, and attempt to move beyond the boundaries of what are the traditional media in art. We are preparing an exhibition in Kasa Gallery titled *Tiny, Nano, Micro, Small* that will showcase some of the best artists that use nanotechnology as a medium. It is my intention to strictly link the research aspect to the exhibition and commercial aspects of the gallery, operating not like a traditional university gallery, but as a competitive commercial gallery. The focus of course will be and will always remain that of nurturing new talent and display practices that are unusual and less mainstream.

Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio: *Now you are 'only' working as an academic, artist and curator and director of Kasa Gallery, director of MoCC (the Museum of Contemporary Cuts), and director of OCR, the new research center you have founded? How do you manage all of these activities?*

Lanfranco Aceti: I eat spinach! I am teasing. It is hard work - constantly moving on to the next thing, the next project, the next activity. I also have an excellent team of people: Özden, Deniz, John, Zeynep, Jonathan, Çağlar who put up with my energy and my tendency to generate work... I think I will have to create a project where we can all sit on the beach of Bodrum in the South of Turkey - an international gathering - where we can all talk about art and sip white wine... Perhaps then I will focus on rest. Or perhaps I will start working to generate multiple outputs. Old habits die hard. ■