

Music

Beyond wall power

Peter Aspden

A special kind of collector is drawn to digital art

Throughout the centuries, art collectors have known exactly how to enjoy the fruits of their pursuit. To collect paintings or sculptures was to enrich their homes and workplaces. To buy art was also, in most cases, to display it. The auction houses invented a label for those works that most impressively announced themselves to potential buyers: they had “wall power”. The steep rise in value of an artist such as Andy Warhol owed much to the accessibility and instant recognisability of his work.

But digital art is another thing entirely. The radical use of technology and the emphasis on dissemination promote artistic values that are at the opposite end of the spectrum from “wall power” art. Virtual reality and internet art may

be intellectually fascinating, but will not impress a dinner party of well-heeled business contacts. Digital artists are intrigued by the opportunities offered by the mass media. Most art collectors, by contrast, want to distinguish themselves from the mass as vigorously as possible.

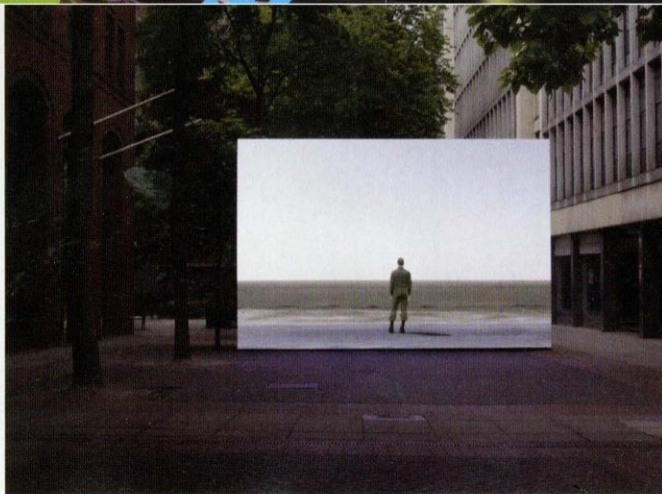
Even a lauded artist such as John Gerrard, whose work at the Manchester International Festival and the Royal Opera House has enthralled viewers, poses a problem for the collector. Gerrard’s collaborations with the choreographer Wayne McGregor, using HD video on a large scale, look splendid displayed in a city centre, or as a backdrop in a theatre. The context is part of their attraction. But they are large and unwieldy: how do they attract the interest of the private collector?

It could be argued that collectors of digital art are more ambitious and attuned to the artist’s world than more mainstream collectors. They are interested in the processes of art, and in its ability to push barriers. The conceptual leaps that are enabled by technological innovation become, for these enthusiasts, much more exciting than the ability to freshen up a dining room.

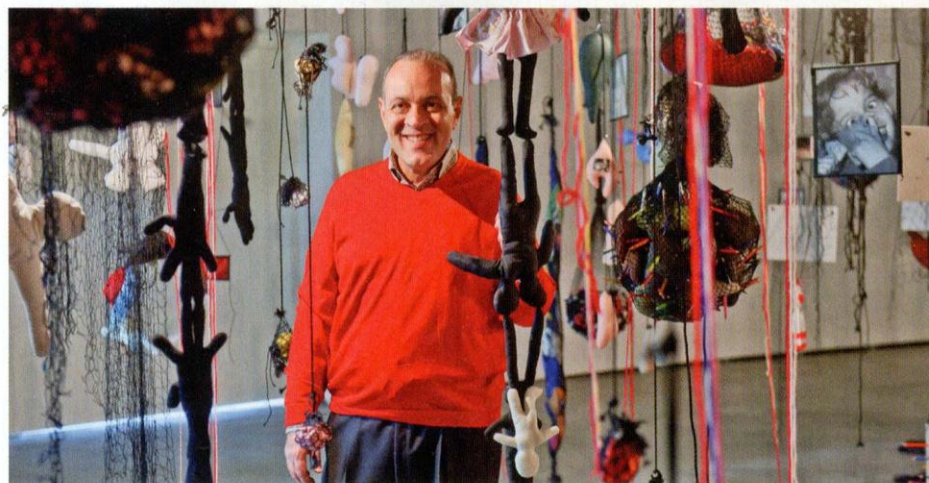
Dimitris Daskalopoulos is a Greek collector of contemporary art who has recently lent parts of his collection to prestigious shows at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. He deliberately seeks out large-scale works that defy simple display. Indeed, he has no permanent place to show his acquisitions other than the lobby of his Athens-based financial services and investment company, DAMMA Holdings, where there is a small sample from his collection of some 500 works. (Daskalopoulos is looking to set up a home for his collection in Athens.)

“My collection is never afraid of size,” he says defiantly as we talk in his office. But it is not only scale that attracts him to digital works. He says he enjoys discovering digital artists because of their sheer determination to express themselves in new ways. “They are antithetical to collectors because new technologies have always been disruptive of existing ways of thinking. But I welcome that. We need something to shake us up.”

A lot of digital work uses video as its focus, but Daskalopoulos gets a sense of déjà vu from some of it. “It is basically a 50-year-old technology.



- 1 Infinite Freedom Exercise (near Abadan, Iran) 2011**
John Gerrard, 2011
Real-time 3D installation at Manchester International Festival
- 2 Dancing in Peckham**
Gillian Wearing, 1994
Video with sound



Dimitris Daskalopoulos

PHOTOGRAPHY: ERIKA BARAHONA-EDÉ; MANCHESTER INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

'We have 14 monitors in our home and a system that enables us to put on any piece on any one of them'

Tony Podesta



I sometimes get a little tired of the abundance of video works [at fairs and exhibitions]. It is an old format, why are we having a sudden discussion about it?"

He admits to having looked forward to "some kind of revolution" as digital art evolved, but doesn't see it in video-based works. "I may not have been as diligent as I should, but I don't think there is very much out there."

For him, the form of the work is not the first consideration, however. "When I am looking at art, I look for the great idea or the great feeling that is behind it, and that can be expressed in a sculpture, a painting or an installation. I look for the themes that fit in with my collection, and how they can add to that discourse."

I ask him whether it is a source of frustration that some digital art is "untamed", incapable of simple enjoyment on a domestic level. "Sometimes when I am going through my holdings, I see a big price and a photograph of a CD, and then you can see parts of the work on YouTube," he says laughing. "But I don't find that prohibitive. Because in the end, the impact of such works when they are shown properly, on a large screen in a dark environment, is very, very powerful."

He also says that digital art presents a new set of problems for collectors. "I bought some works online at a virtual art fair last year, but you do lose your anonymity. Once you click on something, you leave a footprint." It is a far cry from the private visit to a dealer's new presentation in the early hours of the morning.

I ask if the long time-spans demanded by many digital works put off collectors. "Nobody has time to stand around for 40 minutes in a gallery, but if a work has something interesting and profound to say, it is evident very quickly."

Anita Zabłudowicz, who began collecting contemporary art with her husband Poju in the early 1990s and has permanent bases for its display in London, New York and Finland, is dedicated to showing emerging artists, including those working in digital formats, to as wide an audience as possible. Even the collection's new design identity, created by Malcolm Southward, one-time partner of cult design studio



COURTESY OF MAUREEN PALEY, LONDON

8vo, pays tribute to changing technology, consisting of a continuously evolving and morphing visual mark.

She echoes Daskalopoulos in stressing that digital techniques are nothing more than a new tool, albeit one that is evident all around us. "Digital technology is part of the way that we live, and digital art has permeated into the mainstream in a subtle way, without artists even realising it," she says. There is even, already, a reaction against it, she adds, citing Tacita Dean's analogue film installation in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall.

She holds works by artists such as Kelley Walker, Edward Fornieles and Paul Pfeiffer, all of whom use digital innovations such as social media and image manipulation in their work. She finds that young artists are becoming more and more interested in, and accomplished at, editing and manipulation. "It is very complicated and intricate work," she says, "and heading into unknown territory."

Also uncertain are the rules for owning, storing and displaying digital work. "We have recently started working with a consultant to devise best practices for art which involves a digital component. Obviously it is not the CD itself we are worshipping, it is what is contained in it, but CDs wear out, and the art has to be archived properly, to make sure it is always displayed in its pristine form." Such issues bedevil the sale of digital art in the secondary market, another potential hazard for collectors.

Tony Podesta, a leading Washington lobbyist, is another prominent collector who was bitten by the digital bug. "I remember well the first piece I ever bought. I walked into a gallery in SoHo and fell in love with a work by Gillian Wearing that

had been digitally manipulated, in photography and voice – and I just had no idea what to do with it, whether it would fall apart or become one of my most treasured possessions."

Today he owns more than 300 digital works and enjoys the variety that they give to his collection. "When you buy OTC ["Over The Couch"] art, it's not always so easy to know where you are going to put it, and changing it becomes a big deal. We have 14 monitors installed in our home and a system that enables us to put on any piece on any one of them." He says it was a considerable, but essential, investment. "If you ever feel in a certain mood for something, you can call it up, and that is how we live with it."

This is perhaps the most consistent quality to be found in digital art – that it reflects the pace of the technological change that we are living through. "I suppose that the pigments and the paints that are used in painting today are more advanced than those of the Renaissance, but they are not of an entirely different kind. With digital art," he says, "you get the way that technology is ever changing and advancing, in so many ways."

Digital art is attaining its "wall power" – but it is the walls of the great contemporary art collectors that are changing, reflecting the kaleidoscope that is modern living. ■

'It is very intricate work, and heading into unknown territory'

Anita Zabłudowicz

