Miami Art Basel: where art reckons with technology

The Moon glowed against tufts of eerie night clouds. A few hundred people joined Lonneke Gordijn and Ralph Nauta, the Dutch founders of Studio Drift to wait in anticipation. If the winds kicked up, the hours of work invested in their installation would be for naught, but the sea looked calm. At 10PM an illuminated pack of 300 drones rose above the Miami beach shoreline, over high-rise hotels, and traveled across the Atlantic Ocean horizon.

The work was called “Franchise Freedom” and what was most impressive about it was the impact. The drones hovered in the night sky and moved in formation. In synchronicity, they became objects of delicate beauty, like the migratory birds they mimicked. It wasn’t the technical feat to make drones fly that was interesting, but what was most striking was how the algorithm was conceptually rich.

Unlike so many art-as-tech experiences, people stuck around to marvel. For five minutes, all eyes were turned up toward the sky, as if beholding silent fireworks as classical music played from loudspeakers. There were little whoops of delight as the drones seemed to dance across the night sky. It was an effective live performance art experience.

Studio Drift defines itself as a collective that pushes boundaries on technology and nature. Shortly before the drones launched the blue chip gallerist Marc Glimcher of Pace declared this work park of a larger effort to support nontraditional works that engage technology in what he calls Future/Pace. BMW’s marquis sponsorship and support from Intel indicate that patronage is part of making these ambitious efforts possible.

“Members Onlys” by Brian Bress, a high-definition single-channel video (color), high-definition monitor and player, wall mount, framed.
Courtesy of the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles

In the mass of confusion that is Miami Art Basel, there’s more discussion about the issues of our time, and much of that is framed around technology, and the way it is making us think, react, and exist. In the midst of traditional paintings and sculpture on view, Miami Art Basel is demonstrative of how the art world is catching up to internet culture.

When Art Basel first came to Miami in 2002, it was a satellite art fair and an end-of-the-year anchor to the Basel, Switzerland main event held in the summer. But in a perfect storm of palm trees, parties, a surge of interest in art (or at least the lucrative art market), and an Instagram explosion, it’s now become the biggest annual art event in North America, attended by some 85,000 people. And as the fair morphs into two dozen satellite fairs and a weeklong full calendar of art and fashion happenings, it’s also a venue to show how the art by a new generation of artists is being made.

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Outside of the avant-garde, art and technology have often been at odds. The global director of Art Basel, Marc Spiegler, wrote in a September CNN editorial, “For the core of the art world, most digital art seemed overly enamored with its own technology, and often felt conceptually lightweight.” He pointed to Bell Lab’s early work in this space in the ‘60s, Cory Archangel’s 2002 Nintendo hack, and the Austrian festival Ars Electronica as more sophisticated efforts to fuse technology as a medium and an idea.

But as a generation of emerging artists is engaging with

technology in intuitive ways, the natural inclination to use tech as a medium is becoming less forced. For those that have been navigating this space on the fringes of the contemporary art world, it’s a payoff a long time in coming.

The Center for Art, Science & Technology (CAST) at MIT was founded in 2012. “At MIT CAST we have been thinking about new unexpected convergences of the material and digital worlds over the last 30 years, a topic explored in the recent symposium “Being Material,” says Leila W. Kinney, executive director of CAST. “Far from supplanting the material world, as Nicholas Negroponte’s well-known book predicted in 1995, the digital has entirely suffused materiality, creating powerful new possibilities for art, design, and fabrication. We are just beginning to explore, for example, the aesthetic potential of programmable, responsive and self-organizing materials or self replicating algorithms.”

More traditional art schools are beginning to incorporate digital culture into their curriculums. Cal Arts offers an Art and Technology program; Parsons has launched a School of Art, Media, and Technology; and Carnegie Mellon combines studies in humanities with technology in its fine arts program.

But seeing how these works manifest in the consumable collector space shows that the exploration of ideas is no longer only theoretical, but actually desirable. At Miami, the underlying assumption is that the works have collectible potential.

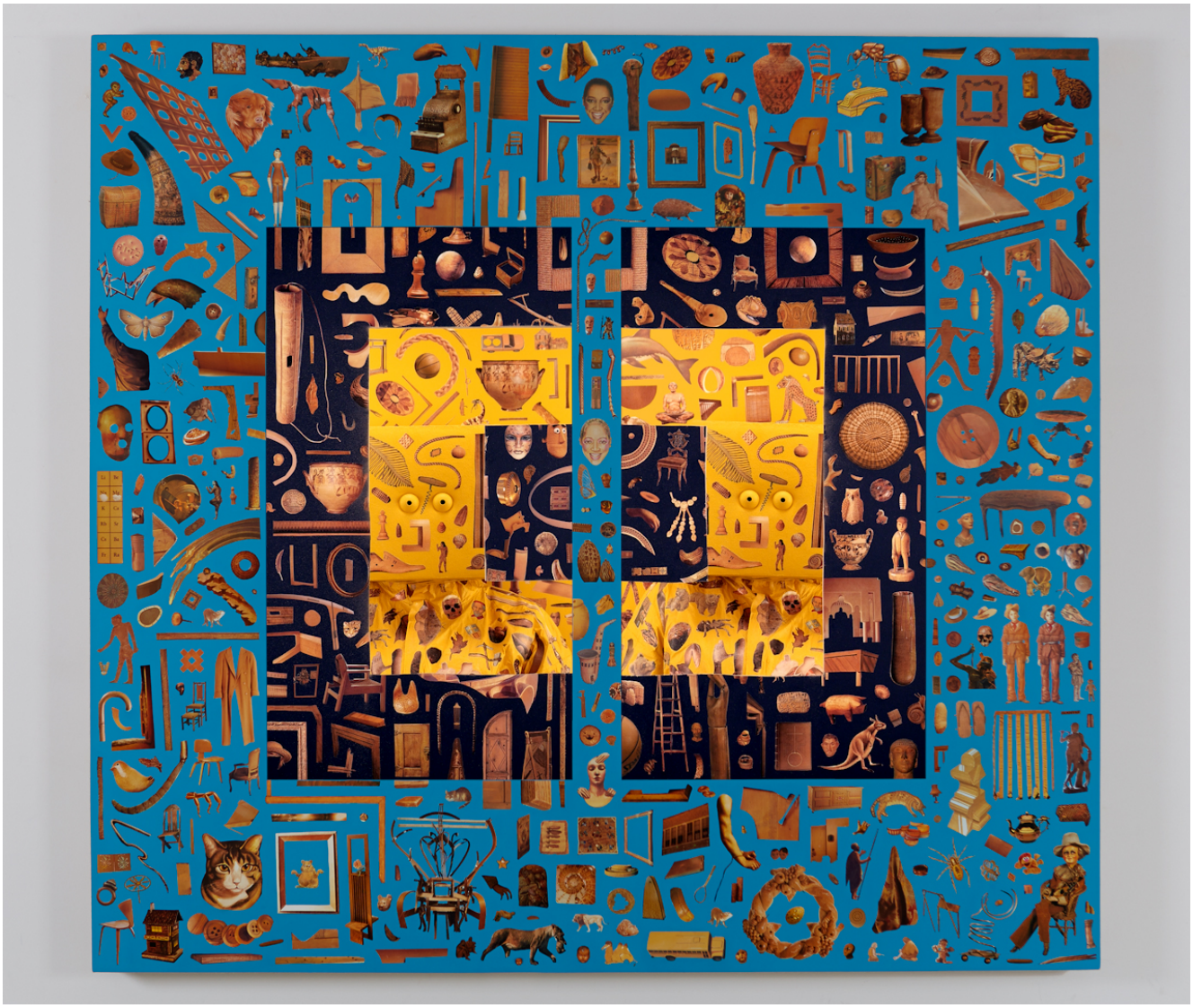
Tony Oursler at Miami Art Basel.
Photo by Tamara Warren / The Verge

It’s an enjoyable exercise to wander the fairs and museums to seek out those who are engaged in the weird way our world is changing by using code, VR, short, trippy films, or by mining

science fiction themes. One standout work was a fantastic older painting *The Space-Time of the Dandelion* by Matta, that was made in 1967. A more contemporary example is Tony Oursler's video work that focuses on facial recognition employed through big data and surveillance programs.

Brian Bress, who has directed videos for the Pet Shop Boys, showed videos at Cherry and Martin gallery. He has spoken about the way he thinks of technology in his studio practice, in one recent interview with *Los Angeles Confidential*. "That question reminds me of a Far Side cartoon where two cavemen artists are standing in front of their cave drawings and they look over at another caveman who's painting on a canvas and easel. One cavemen artist says to the other, "Sure, it's cool, but is it art?" There are no lines," he said.





“Inverted Looking (for Josef Albers),” high-definition dual-channel video by artist Brian Bress.
Courtesy of the artist and Cherry and Martin, Los Angeles

Miami Art Basel wrapped up on Sunday, but it’s only a sliver of what’s happening in the actual art world, and in the studios of artists reckoning with technology in their practices. *The Verge* will explore some of these efforts in a new monthly series Technographica.

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