

UBERMORGEN.COM

Chinese Gold, 2006

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UBERMORGEN-COM is one of the most exceptional couples working in New Media Art or, as they prefer to call it, the European Techno Avant-Garde. Founded in 1999 by Lizvlx and Hans Bernhard, one of the creators of *etoy* (www.etoy.com), the collective has produced a series of works which have become landmarks of this last decade of Media Art. These include *Vote-Auction* (2000), a media performance involving a false site where Americans could supposedly put their vote up for auction, and *Google Will Eat Itself* (GWEI, 2005, in collaboration with Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio), an operation which proposed using Google's own advertising revenue to buy up every single share in the company (in other words, the world's most famous search engine would be bought using its own money).

The name of the group (literally "the day after tomorrow") is a conflation of the futuristic rhetoric of the dotcom business and certain stereotypes of the Far Right (do you remember the Übermensch?) As for the '.com', that aims to present this artistic collective as some sort of business structure (a strategy already followed with *etoy*). This play upon identities reached its apogee in *Vote Auction*, when Hans Bernhard presented himself to the media as the manager of a corporation that intended to "bring capitalism and democracy closer together";¹ it also finds expressions in the company logos (seals) which UBERMORGEN.COM designs for each of its projects.

Only quite recently have UBERMORGEN.COM focussed their attention on videogames, with a very precise purpose. In the series *Machinima* (five videos uploaded on video.google.com and youtube.com between April and May 2006), UBERMORGEN.COM was extending the practice of media hacking and the concept of the [F]original (fake original) to the world of videogames, one of the most economically frenetic and user-popular areas of media. At the same time, they were aiming to "to challenge the already conventional "make and style" of most Machinimas which play within traditional computer-games like WOW or Ego-Shooters."² Machinima are films (some short videos, some veritable full-length films) shot within the interior of the videogame. Usually they use the camera within the game and arise as a means of making visible to others what one is doing. The phenomenon emerged primarily in online gaming, where it became possible to prepare veritable scripts and involve other players as actors. Always attuned to what enthusiasts were doing, the production companies lost no time in making more sophisticated instruments for film direction available; ultimately there was an entire videogame centred on the creation of machinima (*The Movies*, Lionhead Studios, 2005). In short, veritable production studios were set up and a flourishing new business sector emerged.

UBERMORGEN.COM machinima go in a completely different direction. "It is conceptual art. We download a new game for macintosh OSX, we install the videocamera in front of the screen, then we start recording and we play the game once. Then we edit the video and add black sequences and title and put it online on video.google.com, on youtube.com and on the UBERMORGEN.COM web-site."³ Thus, UBERMORGEN.COM exploit the hype around the machinima phenomenon to spread, like viruses, their 'forged originals', media products that occupy the fine line between copy and original, reality and fiction. And they do this whilst rejecting all the conventions of the genre. Their game is rather clumsy and proceeds by trial and error; there is no directing or script; no soundtrack. The use of an external video camera breaks down the image, which is almost always black and white; thus the genre (and the game) are 'historicised'.

The *Chinese Gold* project (2006) consists of two series of photographic prints. The first (*Untitled No.1 – No.7*) is a series of photos taken at an Online-Gaming Workshop in China. Many videogames, from *The Sims* to *World of Warcraft*, have developed a solid business based on the sale

¹ See <http://www.vote-auction.net/>

² In conversation, July 2006

³ In conversation, July 2006

of customised terrain, avatar costumes, weapons and so on. It is no surprise that this has led to the emergence of a sort of videogame *lumpenproletariat*, who work night and day to earn foreign currency by producing equipment to be sold on to wealthier players (generally via eBay). Nor is it a surprise that this phenomenon reflects trends to be found elsewhere in our economy – for example, relocation of production to the countries of South-East Asia, where labour is cheap. An entirely ‘virtual’ economy has therefore produced absolutely real consequences. The project documents these videogame sweatshops and the life of these ‘Chinese Gold Farmers’, with the icons of *WoW* figuring amidst chain-smoking, junk food and doss-house living conditions. As UBERMORGEN.COM explains “The project deals with the virtualisation of capital and with new layers of market-mechanisms without actual goods that have to be shipped, new services such as 'earning computer gold' or 'building up computer-game characters' become a global market of critical mass and therefore start to play a role in our worldwide economy, although what we see today can or must surely be considered the business avant garde of the 21st century.”⁴ The second series (*Chinese Gold – World of Warcraft, Belgrade Session N°1 – N°8*) comprises several screenshots produced during a game session in Belgrade, at a large arcade where Serb gamers spend a large part of their day. Here is the other side of the above-described economy: consumers who “waste” their day in exhausting game session. In fact, there are already communities for videogame addicts who have lost the ability to distinguish between the real and the virtual. This confusion here finds aesthetic expression in the blue monochrome of the first series (which brings together reality and the imaginary world of the videogame) and in the confused visual resolution of the second series (in which it is difficult to tell whether one is seeing an image of the real or the virtual). UBERMORGEN.COM does not hand down judgements; it limits itself to photographing phenomena that foreshadow the economy of the twenty-first century. “The future is now!”

Featured in M. Bittanti, D. Quaranta (eds), *GameScenes. Art in the Age of Videogames*, Milan, Johan & Levi 2006.