



# XXIV GENERATIVE ART 2021

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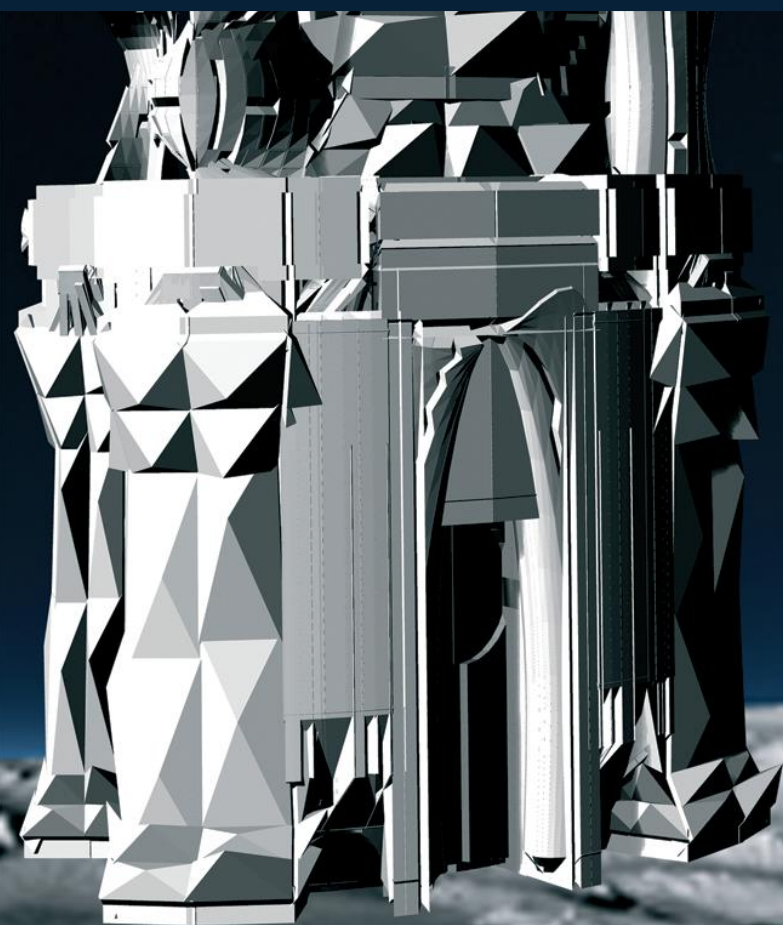
## **Demoscene Dark Matter – The culture that makes people stay in the Scene**

*by Dr. Andre “kudrix” Kudra*

AoC Initiative, Germany | Echtzeit – Digitale Kultur, Switzerland

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# Demoscene Dark Matter – The culture that makes people stay in the Scene

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Dr. Andre “kudrix” Kudra

## Abstract

The *Demoscene*, often only referred to as the *Scene*, is rooted in the home computer revolution. Over decades, it shows how skills and creativity can be stimulated and implemented in a digital cultural practice. With producing *Demos* as digital artistic pieces, many of its techniques and mindsets became core influences of digital change, still vibrant today. People attach strong identity to affiliation to the Demoscene, which is one of the reasons it is seen as culture. There is a tremendous amount of identity, history, emotion, and community.

At first, this paper dives into what defines the Demoscene as a digital culture. To understand its uniqueness, it expands on how culture can be digital. In its main part, the paper goes deep into “the Dark Matter”, i.e., why people join the Demoscene and stay. What drives *Demosceners* to tirelessly invest their creativity and time in the Scene? Which role does *trust* play to remain involved? Which common values enable trust? And how do these defining factors make the Demoscene culture differentiate itself? The paper concludes with a brief critical review and suggested further research.

## 1. Motivation and Context

The author is part of *Art of Coding* [1], abbreviated as AoC, an initiative to get the Demoscene recognized as first digital culture of UNESCO intangible world cultural heritages. The paper utilizes and captures discussions that arose in the AoC Discord channel [2] in April 2021, right at the end of Revision 2021 [3] and after the Demoscene was accepted as UNESCO cultural heritage in Germany in March [4]. It leverages these insights from committed Demosceners. It embeds them in a proven and practically applied construct from organizational theory.

For answering the questions posed in this paper, a curious, investigative mindset is warranted, inviting everybody to think about it.

## 2. Demoscene as Digital Culture

At first, it needs to be understood what digital culture is and what makes the Demoscene unique as such a culture. In general, UNESCO states “that culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” [5]. Whereas it is not always possible to measure such beliefs and values directly, it is possible to measure associated behaviours and practices. As such, the UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics defines culture through the identification and measurement of the behaviours and practices resulting from the beliefs and values of a society or a social group [6].

So how can culture be digital? The discussions on the AoC community platform are clear and revealing: The term “digital culture” is often a simplification of another one, i.e., “works of digital culture”. If it is limited to just the works, then the definition becomes quite apparent: Works of digital culture are the ones which do not exist without a digital medium, contrary to works of “traditional” culture, which can be stored, executed, or performed without usage of digital hardware and software. Works are only products of a culture, not the culture itself, as culture is about people. Hence referring to digital works only is too limited, and a more elaborate definition is

warranted, with adding people to the equation. Culture encompasses creating, exhibiting, and consuming works of people pertaining to it. This allows deriving a definition for digital culture which Sceners are comfortable with:

*The works of a digital culture combined with the people who create these works, and those who enjoy them.*

Taking this definition into account, why is the Demoscene unique as a digital culture? The Demoscene is a born-digital culture, it is a significant part of the world's greater cultural heritage. Being related, linked, or blended with other digital cultures, it has some distinctive factors: *Internet culture* or *cyberculture* required networking, *e-sports* means consuming a software product, not creative expression. Industries like *game development* and *movie production* are creativity-driven for-profit endeavours but career homes for Demosceners. Close ties exist with *retro computing* which commemorates and preserves obsolete machinery, as retro platforms frequently serve as Demoscene competition categories. [7] Further to these: Why is the Demoscene worth preserving under UNESCO recognition? In the successful German UNESCO application, the authors focussed on the practices unique to the Demoscene, from coming together, competition, community, self-limitation as motivational driver (like restriction to old technical platforms or limitations in the size of the program code, known as “size coding”), to hacking attitudes, and the fact that demos are only premiered once and usually in person with the audience voting on them. [8] Since its inception, the Demoscene is a best practice example in the sense of the above digital culture definition.





Figure 1: Evoke 2019 Demoparty in Cologne, an atmospheric digital culture experience (Photo by Tobias Kopka)

### 3. Dark Matter as a Construct

Before analysing the Demoscene as specific case, a theoretical underpinning of the “dark matter” construct is required. Its key constituent is the fact that organizational behaviour cannot solely be explained by its applied management frameworks, types of leaders, or meeting, organizational and goal structures. The observable behaviour of people can almost never be explained by these alone. There must be more to it than these visible and measurable elements of an organization. Potentially it is an even bigger influential factor which cannot be met by the eye.

Organizational theorists hence leverage the “dark matter” phenomenon from astrophysics and translate it into an organizational theory. Dark matter is a hypothetical form of matter, implied by e.g. gravitational effects which cannot be explained by current gravitation theories unless more matter is present than can be seen [9]. Hence a strong analogy can be built between these two domains. Dark matter in organizations has been identified and analysed by various researchers. Common denominator is “positive reinforcement”, which means that the person who shows the desired behaviour is rewarded with something that (s)he likes to receive. [10] [11]

### 4. Dark Matter of the Scene

Due to the nature of the Demoscene, applying the organizational concept of dark matter is not so straightforward. The Demoscene is *not* an organization. The Demoscene is characterized by *chaordic* [12] organizational style, an interplay of chaotic creativity and (mostly) orderly managed events with good record-keeping of productions. It is only loosely organized with its Demogroups and organizer committees for its multitude of real-life get-togethers aka Demoparties. Those are fundamental for its existence. Chaordic also means cooperation and competition in simultaneity. The Demoscene is friendly-competitive to demonstrate (hence the term “Demo”) and advance its members’ skills, along with strong, border-free community spirit.

Uncovering why people join the Demoscene and stay means diving deep into *Demoscene Dark Matter*. As no distinct organization is available to study, cultural practices are to be investigated instead.

At first, why are Demosceners doing what they do? What instigates, enables, or drives their creative expression? Some sort of a pain, or otherwise a shortage, is identified as an important enabler of creativity. AoC discussion participants are on common grounds that to some extent an “alienation feeling” separates many Sceners from other people or even society in general. This motivates them to create things, to express themselves, with any type of aesthetical means, or usually as such an affinity is present, with technical devices. Not only to express their urge but to deal with the feeling, to cope with it, to be able to bear it. For some, it may even come close to a “self-treatment”. Creative expression may be a solo task for themselves at first.



*Figure 2: Sceners getting together and creating their digital works at Evoke 2014 Demoparty (Photo by Tobias Kopka)*

When they unite with likeminded others, a fundament is set on which positive reinforcement can occur. Encountering the Scene can be a revelation for such people. It is much more than a meeting point for people sharing the same

alienation feeling and (technical) creative interest. By its very nature, it is a hotbed of mutual positive reinforcement: Sceners join forces to create artistic works out of their personal computers, with a hard and never-ending push of technological limits. Music, graphics and programmed animations or videos, all are put together with special care and curation, in single, short pieces. They strive for frequently meeting at Demoparties anywhere, their community events, for showcasing their mutual creativity, in a sport-like contest, which honours works perceived as top, judged by fellow Demosceners.



*Figure 3: Sceners watching Demos at Assembly 2019 Demoparty in Helsinki (Photo by Tobias Kopka)*

Tangibly, the Scene provides many ways in which community spirit with positive reinforcement can be experienced:

*Likeminded people.* Liaising with Sceners with the same urge, attitudes, and beliefs as one's owns just naturally happens.

*Integration.* Sceners interact with one another in a friendly but direct manner.

*Elation.* Sceners are both producing and consuming (in their shared view) over-

whelming and stunning creations, which is an uplifting experience.

*Strive for excellence.* Sceners appreciate perfection, as do the surrounding others. Being masterful in a discipline, and being aware of it, is immensely rewarding. (This often pertains to “mastering” a certain device, which is a positive reinforcement induced by the thing itself.)

*Competitive spirit.* Sceners love to enter a comparison of skills in a friendly but direct competition.

*Feedback.* Sceners receive instant reply. It is always a thrill for them at first to not really know what others think of their work. They are overjoyed when their work is praised by the community. They know they can improve if not.

*Impact.* Sceners know they are contributing to *their* community, keeping it alive, having an impact, making a difference. Every piece of contributed work counts and is recognized.

*Teamwork.* Sceners can collaborate with others who have a matching attitude and liking for a specific technology or platform. They combine skills to achieve and produce something they could not have done alone. The Demoscene continuously proves how it withstands and copes with enormous dialectical pressures, from present and future.

*Globality.* Sceners are aware of being embedded in a global phenomenon which does not stop at country borders and is impaired by jurisdictional hassle.

*Safety.* Sceners feel safe in *their* Scene. They *trust* its culture. They find a safety zone, refuge or even second family in the Demoscene.

When digesting these cultural practices and points of experiences, it becomes evident that the Sceners themselves are the instruments of positive reinforcement in all their activities in the Scene, for one another. It is the other *people* that make them stick to it, not the celebration of technology or their Demos, which are inevitably their important cultural works. The Demoscene unveils the natural way in which positive reinforcement unfolds in an *organism*, not having to be imposed as in a human-made arrangement like an *organization*. This is the *Demoscene's Dark Matter*, which may even be the key differentiator of this vibrant digital culture.



Figure 4: Sceners happily dancing together at Revision 2019 Demoparty in Saarbrücken (Photo by Tobias Kopka)

## 5. Conclusion

Potentially the Demoscene culture can never be ultimately defined but applying the Dark Matter construct has proven useful to explain some of its cohesive traits and characteristics. Obviously, a richer and deeper investigation is always warranted, even though already a lot of sociology research has been created and presented on the Demoscene. The *chaordic* features and manifestations of

the Scene seem highly interesting and worth exploring in more detail.

One key purpose of this article, i.e., capturing the gist of the discussion in the AoC context, was achieved. Which produces another interesting research question, not specifically limited to the Demoscene: How can discussions of subject matter experts from basically all domains entertained in online community forums which are “hidden” or at least not easily accessible be preserved and potentially even used by researchers?

An area of further work jointly identified by contributing Sceners is formulating a “Demoscene Elevator Pitch”. This might not be a highly scientific endeavour, but it will be extremely helpful for the community to “sell the Demoscene to a random person so they instantly get it and want to know more”.

## Acknowledgements

A big thank-you and major recognition go to fellow Demoscener Ronny Pries who inspired me most to write this paper and basically coined its title.

Without the rich, deep, and highly insightful exchange of ideas in the AoC Discord channel among Sceners on 5/6 April 2021 related to the topic featured in this paper, it would not exist. Greetings to all those involved, via their Discord handles, by order of appearance: ronny^frhlnstlgo, melkor / dedux, DiskDoctor, Argasek, Luisa/Poo-Brain^Rabenaue, the\_JWPHTER88, Daigoro, goto80, AmigaX86. Thank you for letting me take part and for inspiring me.

Lastly, I dedicate this paper to my friend Thomas “Mugg” Daden, the hands-on

always-happy-to-help driving force of the retro computing community. Mugg quietly passed away on 13 October 2021 and is sadly missed far beyond the Rhine-Main area, in which he was most active. Exactly three years earlier on 13 October 2018, he held the opening event for his beloved *Digital Retro Park* [13] which he co-founded and -managed with other local enthusiasts. Mugg, for you we will not only *Emulate the Past* [14], we will ensure the legacy of us digital pioneers is preserved for generations to come.

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# **GENERATIVE ART 2021**

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**INDEX**

Page 18

OPENING

**PAPERS**

Page 21

**Celestino Soddu**

**Italy**

**Argenia, Generative Art and Design Lab**

**ARGENTIA. INTERPRETING THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF HISTORY TO LIVE ON MARS**

Page 31

**Enrica Colabella**

**Italy**

**Generative Art & Design Lab, Argenia**

**THE GENERATIVE ART OF FINITUDINESS**

Page 43

**Dmitry L. Weise**

**Russia**

**Central Research Institute of Dental and Maxillofacial Surgery, Department of Radiation Diagnostics. Moscow**

**PHYLLOTAXIS IS NOT LOGARITHMIC**

Page 50

**Peter Beyls**

**Belgium**

**University College Ghent, The School of Arts**

**TRILOBITE, A LEARNING ROBOTIC CREATURE USING DEEPPVISION**

Page 59

**Monika Karwaszewska**

**Poland**

**Stanisław Moniuszko Academy of Music in Gdańsk**

**FROM KAMIL CIEŚLIK'S IN DANZIG TO IN EDANZIG**

Page 68

**Alain Lioret**

**France**

**Department of Arts et Technologies de l'Image, Paris 8 University**

**QUANTUM GENERATIVE ART**

Page 74

**Nicolas Reeves, J.M. Chomaz, V. Cusson**

**Canada**

**School of Design, University of Quebec in Montreal, Hydrodynamics laboratory,  
École Polytechnique, Paris-Saclay, Music & Technology, McGill University, Montreal,**

**TECTONICS OF THE MISTS :SCULPTING THE VERY SUBSTANCE OF CLOUDS**

Page 87

**Ben Baruch Blich**

**Israel**

**Faculty of the Arts**

**MODELLING OF ARCHITECTURAL MODEL**

Page 92

**Jack Ox**

**USA**

**Creative Director of Intermedia Projects Inc**

**Research Associate with the Center for Advanced Research Computing, UNM**

**Research Fellow at ART/SCI Lab, ATEC, University of Texas, Dallas**

**DATA FROM DADA: MAPPING KURT SCHWITTERS' SOUND-POEM, THE  
URSONATE, INTO A 73 SQUARE METER PAINTING**

Page 102

**Jan Paredaens**

**Belgium**

**University of Antwerp**

**THE BEAUTY-DEGREE OF PARAMETERS IN GENERATIVE ART**

Page 109

**David Upton**

**UK**

**Artist**

**A SYSTEM FOR GENERATING COLOURS AND IMAGES USING 'ONE-TIME'  
CRYPTOGRAPHY**

Page 120

**Philip Galanter**

**USA**

**Department of Visualization, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas**

**THE ONTOLOGY OF GENERATIVE ART, INFORMATION, AND UNIVERSAL  
DARWINISM**

Page 127

**Stefanie Egger, Christian Lepenik**

**Austria**

**The Invisible Lab, Graz**

**LINEARISATION OF NON-LINEAR PROBLEMS – CURATING A WRITTEN EXHIBITION**

Page 133

**Chad Eby**

**USA**

**School of Art and Visual Studies, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY,  
AMONG BLACK BOXES AND MAZE-BUILDING RATS: REFLECTIONS ON ART  
MAKING WITH AUTONOMOUS RULES; AUTOMATIC CITIES**

Page 144

**Guillaume Rochais**

**France**

**ACCRA, Université de Strasbourg**

**FROM CODE TO OBJECT: ISSUES, APPROACH, AND PROBLEMATICS OF THE  
REIFIED ALGORITHMIC ARTWORK; SIGNS (2018 - IN PROGRESS)**

Page 153

**Nicolai Steino**

**Denmark**

**Aalborg University, Department of Architecture and Media Technology**

**PARAMETRIC URBAN DESIGN AS A MEDIUM FOR THE ARTISTIC EXPLORATION  
OF URBAN SPACE AND FORM**

Page 165

**Yan Bello Mendez**

**Spain**

**CREATIVE FOUNDER & AI EXPERT. SPACEMINDS SL, MADRID  
USING GENERATIVE ART, DATA-STORYTELLING AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE  
BASED GAMES AS EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES TO GENERATE AWARENESS  
ABOUT FALLS PREVENTION**

Page 179

**Dragana Ciric**

**Serbia**

**University of Belgrade**

**[EXO] BETWEEN THE SCIENTIFIC AND ARTISTIC METHODOLOGIES: OPERATING  
REGIMES, OR SOFT ARCHITECTURE OF THE INTEGRATIVE RESPONSIVE KINETIC  
SYSTEM**

Page 208

**Sławomir Wojtkiewicz**

**Poland**

**Technical University of Białystok, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Visual Arts**



**THE APPLICATION OF GENERATIVE DESIGN SYSTEM AND BIM IN THE SHAPING OF CONTEMPORARY RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE DESIGN APPROACH.**

**performance: THE LAND, THE CITY**

Page 216

**Nathan Matteson, Nicholas Kersulis**

**USA**

**School of Design, College of Computing and Digital Media, DePaul University, Chicago IL; Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles CA**

**GOOD-FOR-NOTHING (NO. 2) AND GOOD-FOR-NOTHING (POURS)**

Page 220

**Stig Møller Hansen**

**Denmark**

**Center for Design & Visual Communication, Danish School of Media and Journalism, Copenhagen**

**PROGRAMMING FOR GRAPHIC DESIGNERS: BUILDING A PROJECT-BASED INTERACTIVE ONLINE TEXTBOOK AROUND VIDEO WORKED EXAMPLES**

Page 231

**Stephen M Campbell**

**UK**

**The Puzzle Factory, Salford**

**THE PUZZLE FACTORY'S, GENERATIVE ART STUDIO**

Page 242

**Ahmed Abdulwahid Dhannoon Taha, Oday Qusay Abdulqader Alchalabi**

**Iraq**

**Department of Architecture Engineering, College of Engineering, University of Mosul**

**THE USE OF THE MULTI-FRAMING MECHANISM IN THE FACADES OF ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE**

Page 249

**Andre Kudra**

**Germany**

**AoC Initiative, Germany | Echtzeit – Digitale Kultur, Switzerland**

**DEMOSCENE DARK MATTER – THE CULTURE THAT MAKES PEOPLE STAY IN THE SCENE**

Page 256

**Volodymyr V. Riznyk**

**Ukraine**

**Department of Automated Control Systems, Lviv Polytechnic National University**

**GENERATIVE DESIGN UNDER THE INTELLIGENT MANIFOLD COORDINATE SYSTEMS**

Page 268

**Ela Krieger**

**Israel**

**Art Department, Oranim Academic College, Kiryat Tiv'on**

**ON ARTISTIC AUTONOMY AND THE PATTERN IN JASPER JOHNS'S SCENT (1973–1974)**

Page 276

**Marie-Pascale Corcuff**

**France**

**GRIEF, ENSAB, Rennes**

**BACK TO SNOWFLAKES, AND BEYOND**

Page 287

**Hedy Hurban**

**UK**

**Department of Art, Design Architecture, University of Plymouth**

**AN EXPLORATION OF SOUND, DIGITAL ART, PERFORMANCE, AND WEARABLE TECHNOLOGY INSPIRED BY TRADITIONAL WHIRLING DERVISH MOVEMENT AND FLAMENCO DANCE**

Page 300

**Joshua Holden**

**USA**

**Department of Mathematics, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Terre Haute, IN**  
**STOCHASTIC SNARE DRUMS AND TRANSITION-MATRIX TOM-TOMS: COMPOSING ROCK DRUM KIT SOLOS USING STOCHASTIC PROCESSES**

Page 307

**Helena A. Verrill**

**UK**

**Warwick Mathematics Institute**

**FRACTALS FROM TRUCHET TILINGS**

Page 315

**Daniel Bisig, Ephraim Wegner**

**UK, Switzerland, Germany**

**Center for Dance Research, Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom,**  
**Institute for Computer Music and Sound Technology, Zurich University of the arts,**  
**Zurich, Offenburg University, Offenburg**

**PUPPETEERING AN AI - INTERACTIVE CONTROL OF A MACHINE-LEARNING BASED ARTIFICIAL DANCER**

Page 333

**Henk Hietbrink**

**The Netherlands**

**independent researcher, Utrecht**

**A VISUAL INTERPRETER FOR PRE-DEFINED MUQARNAS UNITS**

Page 343

**Irene Rousseau**

**USA**

**Artist, President American Abstract Artist**

**NATURE AS A STRATEGY FOR PATTERN FORMATION IN ART**

Page 349

**Tanmay Banerjee, Alain Lioret, John Bardakos**

**France**

**Team INREV / AI-AC Lab, Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis**

**re-prOCesS.iN\_(g)\_ene/Rate: [GENERATIVE PROPERTIES OF A LINE IN SYSTEMS**

**ART & RELATIONAL AESTHETICS]**

Page 353

**Daniel Larrain**

**Chile**

**Catholic University of Chile; McGill University**

**PROJECTING TEXT TO MUSICAL MATERIALS: MAPPING AS A CREATIVE PROCESS**

Page 363

**Jeffrey M. Morris**

**USA**

**Department of Performance Studies, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas**

**THE MUSIC OF MACHINE MISREADING:**

**MACHINE LEARNING ARTIFACTS AS SOURCES FOR ARTISTIC CONTENT AND**

**CONTROL**

Page 369

**Erik Demaine, Martin Demaine**

**USA**

**Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA**

**MORE THAN WORDS: FONTS AS GENERATIVE ART**

Page 379

**Aamina Karim Malik**

**Pakistan**

**MEMORIES WITH SOUNDS**

Page 388

**Artemis Moroni, Jonatas Manzolli, C. Dezotti, E. Nascimento, T. Lacerda, G. Kuae, D. Gonçalves, M. Medicina**

**Brazil**

**Division of Cyberphysical Systems – CTI Renato Archer, Institute of Arts, University of Campinas**

**RE-DRAWING CAMPINAS WITH DISC-RABISCO**

Page 394

**Davide Prete, Sergio Picozzi**

**USA**

**University of the District of Columbia, The Catholic University of America**

**FROM DIGITAL TO PHYSICAL: BEST PRACTISES TO 3D PRINT DIGITAL MODELS IN LARGE SCALE PHYSICAL MODELS**

Page 399

**Christopher Fry**

**UK**

**Westminster School of Art, University of Westminster**

**ENCOUNTERS WITH ERRORS: HOW THE ERROR SHAPES RELATIONSHIPS WITH DIGITAL MEDIA PRACTICE**

Page 409

**Alp Tuğan,**

**Turkey**

**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, ÖZYEĞİN UNIVERSITY, İSTANBUL  
LIBERATION OF THE MEDIUM: DECENTRALIZATION OF DYNAMIC GENERATIVE  
ART CREATIONS BY NFT MARKETPLACES**

Page 421

**Benjamin Storch**

**UK**

**Sculpture Artist**

**POINT OF CREATION**

Page 427

**Robert Spahr**

**USA**

**School of media arts, Southern Illinois University Carbondale**

**DEFENDING UNCERTAINTY: THE CREATIVE PROCESS AND GENERATIVE ART;**

Page 428

**Liu Yi-yang Tyler**

**Finland**

**Department of New Media, Aalto University, Espoo**

**ENDLESS, NAMELESS SCULPTURE: HACK THE CRAFTIVISM THROUGH AI**



Page 435

***Performnces, Artworks, and Posters***

Page 437

***Enrica Colabella, Celestino Soddu, Nicola Baroni, Franco Melis***  
***Italy***

***Generative Art & Design Lab, Argenia***

***FINITUDINESS***

Page 442

***Beata Oryl, Michał Garnowski***

***Poland***

***Stanisław Moniuszko Academy of Music in Gdańsk***

***IN DANZIG. A CHOREOGRAPHIC INPHRASIS***

Page 444

***Kathryn Ricketts, Angela Ferraiolo, Arne Eigenfeldt***

***Canada, USA***

***Faculty of Education, University of Regina, Regina; Visual Arts Faculty, Sarah Lawrence College, New York; School for the Contemporary Arts, Vancouver***

***BLOMSTER - THE HUMAN GARDEN***

Page 446

***Kathryn Ricketts, Scott Morgan***

***Canada***

***Faculty of Education, University of Regina***

***RECOLLECTIONS WORN***

Page 448

***Robert Spahr, Jay Needham***

***USA***

***School of media arts, Southern Illinois University Carbondale***

***OBJECTS, PERCEPTION AND TIME: THE PRESENT MOMENT AMPLIFIER AND THE COMING OF AUTO-GENERATIVE SYNTHETIC SOUND***

Page 449

***Barbara Loi***

***Italy***

**poet**

**VOICES OF JANAS, VOICES OF SIRENS**  
**SOURCES FOR ARTISTIC CONTENT AND CONTROL**

Page 454

**Arne Eigenfeldt**

**Canada**

**School for the Contemporary Arts Simon Fraser University, Vancouver**

**THE NEW NORMAL**

Page 455

**Angela Ferraiolo**

**USA**

**Visual and Studio Arts, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York**

**GEOLOGY: A GENERATIVE ARTWORK**

Page 457

**Anjika Verma**

**USA**

**Art Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison**

**DUET**

Page 462

**Caitlin E. McDonald**

**UK**

**Creative Informatics, University of Edinburgh, Edimburgh**

**PELICAN STAIRS: A WAPPING GREAT PANDEMIC MEMOIR**

Page 466

**Santo Leonardo**

**Italy**

**ICT Manager / Generative Artist**

**UNPREDICTABLE ENDLESS VARIATIONS GENERATED BY HARD MATH**  
**PROBLEMS**

Page 469

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**DESCRIBING A COLLABORATIVE, INTERDISCIPLINARY UNDERGRADUATE  
COURSE ON GENERATIVE ART: PAST PRACTICE AND IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE**

Page 470

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**AUTOMATIC CITIES**

Page 471

**Binru Yang, Cody Tucker**

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**TIME-FORM-PERFORMANCE - TESSELLATION DESIGN LAWS**

Page 475

**Guillaume Rochais**

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**SIGNS (2018 - IN PROGRESS)**

Page 478

**Oday Qusay Abdulqader Alchalabi, Ashraf Ibrahim Alhafude**

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**THE ADAPTIVE RE-USED OF THE HISTORICAL ORNAMENTS IN THE SPACE**

Page 479

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**RETRACEMENTS**

Page 482

**Curtis L Palmer**

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**HARDWARE, SOFTWARE & WETWARE LIMITS TO POPULATING INFINITE ZOOS**

Page 486

**Christine Ramsay**

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**STUDIES IN ALUMINUM, STUDIES IN CLAY**

Page 494

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**Greece**

**Polytechnic of Patras , Department of Computer Engineering & Informatics , Hellas**

**BASE POLYGONS , TESSELLATIONS, APOPHENIA, PAREIDOLIA**

**(WHAT IS “REAL” AND WHAT IS NOT ?)**

Page 501

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**VENETIAN DISTORTING MIRRORS**

Page 546

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**[FISHTANK]**

Page 506

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Page 509

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**CITY RITUAL**

Page 510

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**ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICAL ZONES: READING THE WRACK LINES**

Page 514

**Regina Bittencourt**

**Chile**

**Interdisciplinary Artist, Math Art, Santiago**

**HENDEKA: MAKING ART USING MODULUS 11**



Page 516

**Jim Bizzocchi**

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**FLOW**

Page 521

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**HIGHWAYS, A GENERATIVE MEDITATION ON THE GEOMETRY OF INTERCHANGES**

## **OPENING XXIV GENERATIVE ART CONFERENCE**

*Everything has changed in these last two pandemic years. Technology continues to be indispensable but our human identity emerges as a new ancient value to be preserved in order not to simplify our complexity.*

*We wonder to gain a generative connection between different visions and tools in our global world for trying to give an aesthetic answer to the complex problem of our disappearing humanity.*

*So moving from the center of our experiments, theories, and discussions we will try to space around problems and tools where the awareness of the importance of human identity and its fullness and complexity remains preserved and the tools do not become the occasion of an unacceptable simplification of our human identity.*

*Generative Art can be one of the starting points of this step forward in the consideration and use of technologies. First of all, technology should not be rejected just as the creative action of man cannot be rejected or put in the background. As in all manifestations of Art, the idea, the creativity, and the tools are not opposing events but converge in making an art process that enhances us. This must be considered as a basic inalienable point of our human identity.*

*Change in post time is not an exclusion of human characters. As in nature, everything is following a complex evolutionary process where the winner is the preserved identity. This is GA philosophy.*

Celestino Soddu and Enrica Colabella  
Chairs of Generative Art Conferences

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