

## WORK

*Mer Rose Claire* is part of Arvers' ongoing abstract machinima series *La Mer* (2016-) which depicts shapes and abstract landscapes created by the Moviestorm game engine. Evocative of peaceful marine scenes, these videos produce an hypnotic effect on the viewer as abstract patterns, their folding and unfolding, become a generative matrix of what Georges Perec called *species of spaces*. This mesmerizing, rhythmic movement alters the viewer's perceptions.

## ARTIST

Isabelle Arvers is a French artist and curator whose research focuses on the interaction between art and video games. For the past twenty years, she has been investigating the artistic, ethical, and critical implications of digital gaming. Her work explores the creative potential of hacking video games through the practice of machinima. As a curator, she focuses on video games as a new language and as an expressive medium for artists. She curated several shows and festivals around the world, including *Machinima in Mash Up* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 2016), *UCLA Gamelab Festival* (Hammer Museum, Los Angeles 2015, 2017), *Evolution of Gaming* (Vancouver, 2014), *Game Heroes* (Alcazar, Marseille, 2011), *Playing Real* (Gamerz, 2007), *Mind Control* (Banana RAM Ancona, Italy, 2004), and *Node Runner* (Paris, 2004). In 2019, she embarked on an art and games world tour in non western countries to promote the notion of diversity of gender, sexuality and geographic origin, focusing on queer, feminist, and decolonial practices.

## QUESTIONS

**Gemma Fantacci: *Mer Rose Claire* is part of your abstract machinima series *Le Mer*, where shapes of different gradients of color move and stretch in several ways creating an hypnotic watery flow, reminiscent of waves moving through the sea. And yet, compared to the previous videos in the series, *Mer Rose Claire*'s abstract landscape is a multidimensional hybrid: movement, images, music, and sound samples coalesce into a layered composition challenging the viewer's ability to discern objects in a borderless space. Can you describe the process behind its creation? What is the *leitmotif* of the entire series?**

Isabelle Arvers: This series is part of a larger and broader reflection about spaces shot in virtual environments and subsequently screened in physical spaces inhabited by performers. The point of departure was a question I was asked after a machinima screening that I curated in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in 2009: "Is there a specific narrative in machinima? Does being inside a video game influence the narrative?" As I couldn't answer in an affirmative way, I came to the realization that the future of machinima might not necessarily coincide with linear narrative. That's why I began my collaboration with choreographers and musicians. I wanted to create abstract or contemplative spaces they could inhabit.

The series *La Mer* was first created during a collaboration with Tidiani Ndyaye a choreographer from Mali for his piece [Bazin](#). The choreography was based on the Bazin fabric (*an African textile famous for its bright, bold hues and luxurious feel, often used to create incredible religious garments, party attire, and even interior decor, Ed.*) and we could use its white surface as a screen. Looking for patterns that wouldn't mimic wax, I ended up by using waves in the game engine and moved between lines with my camera, fascinated by loops and glitches in the mountain and waves representations. The lightings, bringing different colors and atmospheres to the videos mapped on the fabric, were shaping the space and forming colorful sculptures while dancers were playing with the fabric. The collaboration didn't work with Tidiani but thanks to *Bazin*, I initiated my serie *La Mer* which was then exhibited in many different countries and finally evolved into an immersive audio visual installation: *Ce qui me manque*, where *Mer Rose* and *Mer Violette* were [projected in 2019 on a sea of sand inside a cave](#), on the original sound creation produced by [Whadat XP](#) for these two videos, [Modern Slavery](#) and [L'expérience du couloir](#)

**Gemma Fantacci: The soundtrack of *La Mer* is an assemblage of different sources, including a dialogue from Dino Risi's film *In nome del Popolo Italiano* and DJ Gunnar Haslam's acid/ambient beats. This mix creates a powerful aural experience. How did you choose this specific selection for *Mer Rose Claire*?**

Isabelle Arvers: The music was created and mixed by [Eva Peel](#) and [Mike Theis](#) who curated *Les Nuits Vernies*, an evening of music and visuals at the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (MuCEM), in Marseille. Peel is a singer and DJ and a multimedia artist based between Paris & Marseille. She's also the creative director of an artist collective and record label called Deviant Disco. Theis is a musician and film score composer living in Paris, who also owns the record label [Yukfu](#). They wanted to open the evening with a hypnotic warm up for the party. As you may know, MuCEM is surrounded by water. Influenced by Balearic culture and mediterranean atmosphere, the soundtrack is a reflection of the wavy sounds of the sea. The first three tracks are original work composed on synths by Mike Theis, the other tracks are a selection of various artists mixed by Eva Peel.

**Gemma Fantacci: The *Le Mer* series reminds me of Rothko's paintings. The American painter focused on the relationship between space and colors on large canvases in order to create abstract landscapes, walls of light that needed to be *experienced* rather than simply viewed. Both the multiform series and your work tend to dematerialize the object, which directs the viewer's attention to the concept of space. In Georges Perec's *Species of spaces and other pieces*, space requires the acknowledgement of limits, because a borderless environment is too elusive to grasp. Therefore, Perec embarks on a meticulous and fascinating classification of the objects within the space that he encounters. It seems to me that your work is very much also about the void created by the abstract shapes and by the movement of those water. Where does the need to investigate space through the lack of an identifiable object come from? How much was Perec influential on the creation and development of *Le Mer*?**

Isabelle Arvers: I like this reference to Rothko as he is one of my favourite painters. I often use the term “Rothko in motion” to describe my work. I also do believe that colours need to be experienced not simply seen, so the goal with my abstract machinima, is to be able to dive in and swim in them. I also would like to provide a sense of materiality to images and colors and to be able to walk through them, wandering around shades and glitches. I think about glitches as doors inside images. You can get into the code and step into spaces that reveal an alternative side to pictures. Regarding the installation *Ce qui me manque*, I wanted to screen my videos on a **vape** sea, but we couldn't afford the right one. It would have allowed us to create a cloud of colors that could be crossed by viewers, imaging themselves swimming between the lines. That's why we ended up screening *Mer Rose* and *Mer Violette* on a sea of sand, inside a wonderful cave in Auvergne, where the audience was immersed in a hypnotic wave of sounds and colors. As for Perec's book *Species of Spaces*, I kept only one sentence. The entire *la Mer Series* wants to reveal a world of abstract patterns, folding or unfolding, opaque or reflective, to test the possibility of creating “types of spaces”, to quote Georges Perec's book, which aims to modify the perception of observed movements. “Space dissolves like sand running through your fingers. Time prevails and leaves me nothing but shapeless shreds: Writing: meticulously trying to hold something back, to ensure the survival of something: tearing a few precise fragments from the deepening void, leaving, somewhere, a furrow, a trace, a mark or some sign”. In response to this dematerialisation of the object, these “image movements” react to the abstraction of the image produced by the game engine. The sea becomes abstract, full of glitches, and its image is transformed into a series of fragmented polygons stretching out under the eye of the virtual camera.

**Gemma Fantacci:** In an interview with Hack Circus, that mentioned that you have “always enjoyed reverse engineering, autonomy towards technologies and the situationist notion of détournement [...] That's what I like in DIY, 8-bit music, machinima, weird games: they transform mass consumption objects into ways of expression.” What's interesting about machinima and artistic practices that use video games is that they appropriate highly commercial games, triple A productions like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*, and then subvert the intentions of the original developers, recontextualizing their uses and introducing a kind of creative abuse. We've seen works that reflect upon contemporary issues pertaining to society, politics, economy, gender, minorities' struggles. Artists working with machinima tend to appropriate and subvert video games that present the player with the same stereotypes and faulty mechanisms informing our daily life. This approach is reminiscent of the Situationists, but also Dada. What's your take on this ongoing subversion?

Isabelle Arvers: Hacks, glitches, bugs and mods are means to reclaim universes and texts conceived by game developers in order to give back to players a kind of freedom they might be deprived of by a code that shapes their game experience. One time, during one of my machinima workshops, a teenager told me: “When I play a video game I always know what is going to happen next as I have played it multiple times. In machinima, I am the one who decides what is going to happen next”. Each one of my workshops starts with the screening of *The French Democracy* (2005) by Alex Chan to show how a game can be used in a political way to address issues like racism. I also show *Finding Fanon* (2015) by Larry Achiampong and David Blandy on the cultural consequences of colonisation by using the Grand Theft Auto game engine. My goal is to transform a mass consumption object into a tool of meaning production.

I wrote an [article for la Revue Multitudes](#) about the use of machinima as a counter fiction referring to *This Spartan Life*'s episode about internet neutrality, which was sent to Congress members to influence their vote on COPE (Communications Opportunity, Promotion and Enhancement Act ). Thus I do believe that machinima can be as powerful as Situationists film: they both recycle and detourn popular culture to convey political and social ideas about society. Of course, we can also see an influence from Dada and Surrealism as we can deconstruct spaces and aesthetics thanks to machinima experimentations closed to the practice of collage. Right now, I am investigating the work of anarchist individualists as my grandfather Henoeh Zimet vel Leuchner. He was part of this movement and travelled across Europe from Ukraine where he was born in 1895. He arrived in France in the 1920s, living in hotels without paying taxes and experiencing the so-called Bohème period, and was close to Raymond Duncan and its Akademia as well as the Japanese painter Foujita. Mind freedom and individual emancipation from any type of power or alienation was their motto and I am currently trying to draw connections between their ideals and my work as an activist using games as a medium to change the status quo in the entertainment industry.

**Gemma Fantacci: The past few years, the Mediterranean sea, the so-called *Mare nostrum*, has proven to be a monstrum as hundreds of migrants in search of a better life have drowned. The theme is migration is central in your artistic practice. How does your series about the sea relate to your previous machinima, such as the documentary *Heroic Makers vs Heroic Land* (2017), when you interview the residents of the infamous Jungle of Calais in February 2016?**

Isabelle Arvers: As a curator, I worked for four years on the subject of migration and border for the art and research project [antiAtlas of borders](#), and I curated six exhibitions in Europe trying to answer the current scientific research on the Twenty First century borders mutations using art and activists works. For the *antiAtlas* project, I started a series of [machinima workshops](#) on borders and migrations with the Egyptian artist Ahmed El Shaer. We began by examining representation's issues in video games and game engines, finding it very hard to address contexts outside the western standards. I directed *Heroic Makers vs Heroic Land* in the refugee camp of Calais to show the camp inhabitants what we could do in a machinima workshop as my aim at that moment was to document the life in the camp, asking its residents to describe their daily lives. In 2018, as a tribute to Nathalie Magnan who just passed, we organised an event at MuCEM – [TRANS//BORDER, Nathalie Magnan's teachings](#) – in which we tried to present the current trends of cyber and techno feminism, ecosexuality and situated knowledge, and the mediterranean sea as a mediated sea of control technologies.

If the series *la Mer* relates to these ideas, it is more as praise for diversity and a more heterogeneous world than just a black and white one. The art critic JP Fargier wrote in the [Turbulences Videos Review about Ce qui me manque](#) that “One feels like diving into this underground and yet so celestial atmosphere. Isabelle Arvers offers us the key to the rainbow: we can walk in its contrasting folds, wrap ourselves in its nuanced fabric. The hope of living in a friendly world cures us of our black ideas, so easily sustained by the spectacle of contemporary political unconsciousness.”

**Gemma Fantacci: In regard to your incredibly prolific curatorial practice, you've worked in the field of digital art and video games for more than two decades and paid close attention to hacking practices and collaborative projects. Looking back on your experience, how has the curatorial scene evolved in the last twenty years? Do you find that the emphasis on an Anglo-European angle is detrimental to a more meaningful understanding of gaming-related practices? And how did your curatorial approach change while working with non Anglo-European cultures?**

Isabelle Arvers: When I started to work with games in the art context, I wasn't perceived positively as the art world was quite dismissive towards any kind of relationships between art and video games. The turning point was 2012, when MOMA integrated them in its collection that video games started to be perceived as a cultural object. [After Playtime](#), which was my first big game exhibition, with more than 36.000 people in a three day festival at la Grande Halle de la Villette in 2002, I mostly worked abroad for that reason. With the rise of serious games and cultural heritage in retro gaming exhibitions, this trend slowly began to change. Since 2010, exhibitions, events and festivals mixing art and games have appeared all over the United States and in Europe. I was extremely happy when I visited a contemporary art biennial in Berlin which showed artworks and games exhibited together without making a hierarchy between different genres. Now, digital games frequently appear in the most diverse artistic practices within new generations of artists. Consider, for instance, Jon Rafman, Lu Yang, and Ip Yuk Yiu, just to name a few.

Working with games and the way they tend to portray reality, the question of who is producing them is not neutral anymore as games can be used to convey meanings, ethics and concepts that can manipulate people's mind. So, to follow Anna Anthropy's praise for more diverse games thanks to more diverse game makers, I also believe that we need to focus on [games produced](#) outside the mainstream networks. In order to achieve such a goal, I started to travel to meet indie game makers from the Global South and started collaborations and exchanges with artists to produce together projects *in situ* and share what I found during my journey.

**Gemma Fantacci: In a 2019 interview with Régine Debatty for WE MAKE MONEY NOT ART you discussed the need of promoting decolonial practices during your workshops and you mentioned travelling to Brazil and Egypt and finding somehow hard to have youngster play indie games or experiences related to their culture. This is interesting, could you tell us about these experiences? How do you get them to shift their perspective?**

Isabelle Arvers: In that interview, I referenced a workshop I organized for kids and teenagers in São José do Barreiro in Brazil. It was easy to make them play *Grand Theft Auto* as they loved it and found it fascinating. Moreover, it was an opportunity to socialize with other teenagers and learn about their talents. They were proud to be able to play *Grand Theft Auto* and to be very good at it. However, when I was trying to make them play *Papo & Yo* (Minority Media Inc., 2012) or *Toren* (Swordtales, 2015), they got easily bored and wanted to play "another game". This is also one of the first expressions I learnt in Portuguese. They were bored because they couldn't show off in front of their friends as they didn't know anything about these games. Also, they did not find the graphics particularly appealing. They lamented the fact that the game felt "less realistic" compared to games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. I had the same kind of reactions towards indie games in most of the places where I organised machinima workshops. I believe that our role is now to promote indie games in schools, libraries, cultural spaces to broaden their horizons and let them appreciate different kinds of gameplay experiences and, above all, *different kinds of aesthetics*. As we have to educate our taste to be able to appreciate a particular cuisine, there is also the need to diversify our understanding of what a video game is beyond the standard of hyperrealistic, Triple-A products.

**Gemma Fantacci: During the lockdown, the popularity of commercial games such as Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* exploded. It became a place to hang out, a form of social gathering. Content based or related to this game flooded Twitch and Instagram. It felt like everyone was on vacation on a virtual island. Interestingly, some artists, including Brent Watanabe, produced work that actively engages with the underlying consumerist ideology that informs this game. His recent project *Animal Crossing: All Mine* is a commentary on the capitalist logic underneath the game's *kawaii* design, and disarmingly pastel aesthetics. Is the role of the artist to present counter-narratives to the dominant ideologies? If that's the case, is machinima the most effective strategy to deconstruct the medium of the video game?**



Isabelle Arvers: When I read your question I immediately thought about the first time I heard about *Animal Crossing* during lockdown. I was in Lomé, in Togo, when Zuraida Butter, the new Program Curator for AMAZE, invited me to curate the *Art & Games World Tour Sessions* from Latin America, Asia and Africa for the Total Digital Edition of AMAZE. During our first online meeting, Zuraida told me about her garden in *Animal Crossing* and we had some fun as I was planting and growing a real garden in the backyard of the house where I was staying. Getting back to your question, I strongly believe in games as a counter-narrative force as I already mentioned [This Spartan Life](#) and [Finding Fanon](#) as very good examples. It is not a coincidence that the Islamic State is using *Grand Theft Auto* to attract and recruit new fighters toward their cause since games are a medium able to reach a very diverse and young audience. But this strategy needs to become more popular because even amongst gamers or art students, machinima is still barely known. Additionally, besides games demos, the use of screen captures software is rarely identified as a self-expression medium nor as a political tool.

**Gemma Fantacci: I'm very interested in learning more about your *Art + Games World Tour*. You are traveling around the world to meet artists, independent game developers and game communities from non-Western countries including Asia, India, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa, creating connections to share the work and highlight female, queer, and decolonial practices. How is that project going? What did you learn?**

Isabelle Arvers: I had to stop my tour because of the pandemic in March 2020 and then I spent five months in Togo during the lockdown, where I was able to organize machinima workshops in a wonderful meeting with traditional storytellers from the city and I even became the Machinima Voodoo priestess: Azongnike, the spirit without enemies. I also continued to interview game makers online with a series of conversations with African game makers for the French Institute in Togo. I was recently in Kenya, invited by the French Alliance to curate the VR and Games exhibition at the [Jibambe na Tec festival](#) and held a workshop with an amazing storyteller, Helen Alumbe Namai, combining traditional Kenyan stories with game engine environments made by students from the Technical University of Kenya and the African Digital Media Institute. At the moment, I am preparing the second phase of this tour and I am going to resume it from where I stopped in Ghana. I am planning to visit other African countries as well as the Middle East as I want to complete this comparative survey of games and digital art from the Global South. What I have learnt is that we cannot speak about post-colonialism but rather *neocolonialism*. The colonial forces spread through language, cultural representations, and all the soft power media, in which games play a major role. It's interesting that, at the same time, a new generation of creators and game developers are starting to produce cultural artifacts for their own market, showing their environment and sometimes addressing their culture. Such practice is about providing counter-representations and counter-narratives to the status quo. That's the subject of my curatorial work at the [Overkill festival in Enschede: Don't liberate us, we take care of it!](#) festival.

**Gemma Fantacci: I read that you were in Ghana when the pandemic exploded and you decided against returning to France. Instead, you headed to Lomé, in Togo. So, despite your plans for the *Games World Tour* have changed this situation has made you discover an interesting cultural turmoil among the game developers and the digital artists of the city and the country in general. How's the digital landscape of Togo and what are the main research topics of the gaming community? Where are you know?**

Isabelle Arvers: Togo wasn't among my destinations as it isn't famous for its digital art or game production but before starting my tour, Oulimata Gueye, one of the curators of Digital Imaginaries, Africa in Produktion at [ZKM](#) told me about Sename Koffi and I decided to interview him online. Thanks to Sename I discovered the Woelab (Woe means to do it in Ewe, one of the main languages spoken in Togo), the first FabLab created in Togo, and its whole digital ecosystem. He also introduced me to the digital exhibition *Lomé+: past, present and future* which focuses on the past and present of the Togolese capital while projecting into the future. After this interview, I wrote two articles for the magazine [Makery](#) and got in touch with several creators. I started machinima workshops and meetings to use digital media to reveal, document and promote oral culture and traditional performative arts. Also, thanks to my partnership with the French Institute, I started to [interview game makers](#) in Lomé. Pio Tchédou is the first Togolese game maker I heard of, who created a running game to help people to discover his culture, alleging an animal spirit to each family. I then interviewed Koami Woudoufia who just started a game studio in Lomé working on a game about migration aiming at pushing people to stay in their country and work there instead of migrating somewhere else for nothing. I also discovered a game for kids, made by Woelab, promoting the work of Paul Hayi, one of the most famous Togolese and African artists, barely known by new generations.

**Gemma Fantacci: You have just started a PhD program as an extension of your *Art & Games World Tour* in Portugal: Decolonizing art and video games by promoting diversity in gender, sex, and geographic origin. How do you find the time to concentrate on your dissertation these days?**

Isabelle Arvers: Thanks for asking about time! I did a Zoom marathon in November and gave a lot of training besides workshops, mentoring for a Franco-Argentinian [Game Jam](#) and opening two exhibitions: one in real life in [Nairobi](#) and the other one online for Overkill. I want to keep two months for myself to write and read, read and write, in December and January, meaning now. I have to confess that I am working on this PhD with the mindset of a producer and I first started to secure the means of production before starting to write, but I am lucky to be supervised and supported by [Patricia Gouveia](#), who is also an art and games curator who recently curated the wonderful exhibit *Playmode* in Lisbon. Also, this PhD is a practice-based one so the second phase of the Art & Games World Tour is part of the PhD and all my activities are intertwined with my research. And from now on, my time is dedicated to my research and divided between writing in the morning and reading in the afternoon.

**Gemma Fantacci: Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

Isabelle Arvers: Thank you so much for your time and these questions as they push me to provide a theoretical framework to my practice ;-)



