

## Reflections on Montreal's Elektra festival, its twentieth edition, and the exhibition of digital media art

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In ELEKTRA's own words, the digital art festival has been 'helping audiences explore the diversity of performance practices, particularly audiovisual and robotics, since 1999' and takes place over six days and nights in selected venues across Montreal. While the festival has become an important place to experience digital art in Montreal, it also functions as a node within the international network of festivals that curate similar work. Its emphasis on digital art sets it apart from other festivals more focused on electronic music, e.g. MUTEK. Over the years ELEKTRA[1] has added an International Marketplace for Digital Art (MIAN), a two-day symposium of workshops for digital artists, producers, curators, and educators,[2] as well as an International Digital Art Biennial (BIAN), which expands the festival in its programming into a full biennial (e.g. number of participating artists, venues, and duration).[3]

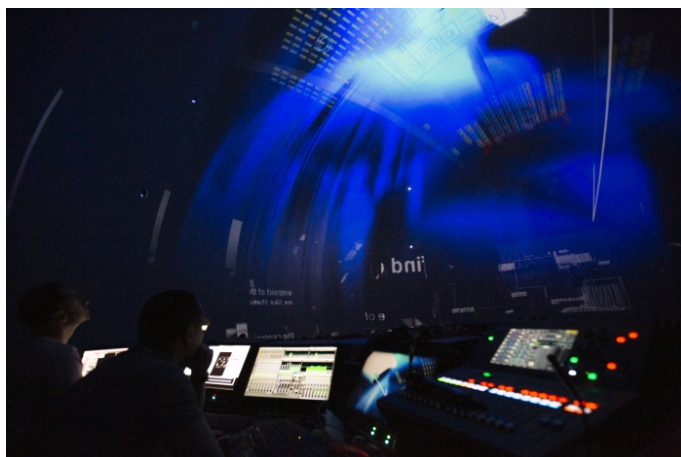


Fig. 1: Usine C's control boards © Gridspace, 2019.

This year was the special 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of the festival, which was acknowledged not only in a retrospective immersive performance but also in its exhibition of photographs at Usine C that documented selected moments from the beginning. On the festival's programming concept, founder and artistic director Alain Thibault notes in his introduction to the festival guide that the programming 'focussed on performance, reflects the aesthetics and tendencies that seek a more intimate dialogue between people and technology, moving beyond the simple notion of the audience by offering more immersive and extreme experiences'.[4] The programming was generous in scope, with work ranging from internationally recognised digital artists to a promising media arts student collective, while exploring a variety of intimate relations between the digital technologies and audience members. Similar to films in film festivals, digital artworks also circulate among a range of other festivals, as evinced in the biographical notes of the various participating artists and groups. ELEKTRA serves as a node among others, such as Sónar in Barcelona, SMAK in Ghent, Ars Electronica Festival in Linz, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, V2\_'s DEAF in Rotterdam, ICC in Tokyo, NAMOC in Beijing, and Transmediale in Berlin.



Fig. 2: Photography at Usine C © Gridspace, 2019.

Montreal has been promoting itself as a festival city,[5] especially around but not exclusive to the planned development of the so-called Quartier des Spectacles, near Place des Arts,[6] extending far beyond film festivals to include a contemporary art biennial, but also poetry, circus arts, and theatre festivals. This year's edition of ELEKTRA took place across the city in a dozen venues, both art galleries and dedicated performance spaces. Each work was

paired with an appropriate space according to the nature of the piece, particularly its physical scope, thematic resonance with others programmed, and degree of performance. The art gallery spaces accommodated eleven artists or collaborative teams, while the dozen performances were largely held in the main festival site of the Usine C, a former early-twentieth-century factory converted into a creative performance space, or the purpose-built fulldome of the SAT building.

The Société des arts technologiques[7] (SAT), both a society and a building situated at the northern edge of Old Chinatown, contains a purpose-built Satosphère or 'fulldome' immersive dome-based video projection space that is a crucial venue for ELEKTRA. Generally, in a fulldome, real-time (interactive) or pre-rendered (linear) computer animations, or live capture images, are projected onto the inside surface of the domed cylindrical room, creating an immersive audiovisual environment.[8] The fulldome expands on the 'immersive film' idea from the 1990s, while resonating with the historical painted or photographic panorama, expanded cinema, and audiovisual projections of the planetarium formats. Instead of fixed seating, the Satosphère fulldome strews bean-bag chairs across the floor, permitting audience members to select and fashion one's own horizontal position to enhance the experience. In the Satosphère each audience member is allotted one bean bag to arrange as they see fit.

This edition of ELEKTRA programmed three fulldome works, the first two were recorded-playback projections and the final one a live performance. The Argentine media artists Mene Savasta Alsina and Andrés Colubri's *Espacio de Datos* (2018), translated as the 'space of data', is a recorded projection of image and sound created from data sets as a playful exploration of contemporary big data processing and data visualisation. The second fulldome piece, by the Montreal collective susy.technology (comprised of the artists Milo Reinhardt, Teodoro Zamudio, Cat Lamoureux, and Xavier Arocha), *Indivisible* (2017-19), explores the 'tension between tangible and intangible, virtual and embodied experiences, fantasy and concrete reality'. They work to achieve that through a layered image and sound manipulation, integrated with voice samples that foster a heightened sense of intimacy. The third and most compelling piece was Vienna-based Monocolor's *Latent Space*, a sophisticated live audiovisual performance controlled from the podium by Marian Essl, the artist himself.[9] It was the only piece in which the audience members were asked to stand for its duration. *Latent Space* is composed of projected monochromatic mobile lines and shapes that strongly suggest a three-

dimensional net or network while they mutate and develop on the surface of the fulldome and electronic drone sounds enhance the experience. The three fulldome pieces were as varied as their makers but, curiously, relied on similar software applications in the creation of their works.

Usine C, the former Raymond Factory, located just north of the Gay Village, remained the centre of the festival, where all the multimedia performances took place outside of the SAT's fulldome. The repurposed factory serves as a well-known venue for experimental theatre, dance, and electronic music performances in the city. Below, I will describe a selection of five of the performances to give a sense of the rich variety of works programmed.



Fig. 3: Hentschlaeger's *FEED.X* fog © Gridspace, 2019.

Austrian-American artist Kurt Hentschlaeger's brilliant *FEED.X* (2004-18) is an immersive light and sound performance, programmed in part as a retrospective, as he continues to develop the piece.[10] The audience is first seated in a conventional theatrical arrangement facing a blank lit white screen at the front of the room while ambient electronic sound fills the space. Over several minutes fog gently fills the room until it is impossible to see clearly. The performance is composed of artificial fog, stroboscopic and pulse light, with a sub-low bass soundscape, which altogether eliminate any sense of depth of field and disorient the audience members. The live performance is located in the artist's control of the sound and laser lights that undulate and diffuse through the fog without discernible image or sound referent. In the end, Hentschlaeger's piece breaks down any sense of outside-in and troubles the received convention of viewing a performance or film. Even with eyes shut, one experiences the undulating light and sound. The

piece ends with the dissipation of the fog, as the audience members regain their senses.

In stark contrast to the fog and non-representational *FEED.X, Repeat* (2019) is a dance performance choreographed by Brisbane-based new media artist Louis Philippe Demers that deftly integrates machine-like repetition and variation with dancers' bodies in exoskeletons reminiscent of the posthumanist work of Australian artist Stelarc, on the one hand, and Ferdinand Leger's *Ballet mécanique* (1924), on the other. The piece projects a warning about labour in our age of increasingly mechanised work and redundancy of the human body. The audience members were seated encircling the performance, which confined itself to a circular space, located in a darkened Usine C.



Fig. 4: Demers' Repeat © Gridspace, 2019.

The Spanish-French artist Rocio Berenguer's multimedia performance *Ergonomics* (2017-18) is a tightly choreographed satire on the place of the body as technologies continue to develop and interpellate the body, performed by Marja Christians, Patric Sean Kuo, and the artist herself.[11] *Ergonomics* offers a pointed parody of the in-house motivational corporate video and neo-liberal business models of innovation and growth. Of particular interest here is the context of the so-called Smart City, the networked digital space that monitors our every action through our mobile digital devices.[12] The piece comprises a witty catalogue of corporeal poses, which habitually take place in the

contemporary work environment and is articulated throughout the performance, along with cliché uniforms, gestures, and tone of voice.



Fig. 5: *Ergonomics* © Gridspace, 2019.

Breaking with the satire of *Ergonomics*, French dancer and hybrid-artist Kirikoo Des, known as NSDOS, takes the surveillance capacity of new technologies in another direction in his performance *Sending.Movement 2.0* (2019). Here data is monitored and transmitted live from his body to the musical instruments on stage. The instruments themselves are hardly readymades but rather hybrids rescued and resuscitated from historical, moribund, or even obsolete technologies. The strangeness of the instruments invites an anticipatory alternative futurist vision of what might be.



Fig. 6: NSDOS' *Sending.Movement 2.0* © Gridspace, 2019.

Moving away from embodied futurism, sound and light artist Edwin van der Heide, based in the Netherlands, continues to develop and explore the relationship between sound and light in movement in his *LSP (Laser Sound Performance)* (2003-2019). In this case artificial fog highlights the three-dimensionality of the laser projections through the space onto the front screen. The greenish light patterns retain a very formal geometric quality as they are manipulated in relation to the electronic sounds.



Fig. 7: Lasers of LSP © Gridspace, 2019.

Moreover, situated on a landing in Usine C, Quebec media artist Jean-Pierre Gauthier's rather fantastical, interactive robotic sound installation *Sound Settler* (2019) aims to colonise planet Mars with electronic music with the help of Earth-bound participants. In principle, the movement of the human arm on Earth would generate the movement of a similar robotic arm at a distance on Mars while generating electronic music in the process. This piece remained freely accessible to the public on site for the duration of the festival.

Montreal-based digital artist Erin Gee in collaboration with Korean-American Alex Lee rework the inherited tropes of the VR computer game in a critical-feminist framework in their Project *H.E.A.R.T.* (2017-19) at the art-run centre *perle de signal* in the Mile-End district. Their three-minute simulated game measures the participant's heartbeat, emotional static, and perspiration via one finger. In brief, measured calmness decreases the amount of killing, while the excited body increases deaths. The piece invites players to rethink gaming, its genderedness, its readymade genres, narratives,

and characters. This was one of the few pieces explicitly informed by feminist critique at the festival.

Housed in its own gallery space at the Cinémathèque québécoise, the video installation *Co(AI)xistence* (2017) by French visual artist Justine Emard deserves mention. This piece documents the interactions between the actor-dancer Mirai Moriyama, a Japanese actor/dancer and Alter, with the humanoid robot version of the AI created by the Ishiguro and Ikegami Labs in Japan. The interactions demonstrate a basic level of the AI-robot's capacity for pattern recognition and 'learning' with human expressive qualities concentrated in its face and hands.



Fig. 8: *Co(AI)xistence* at the Cinémathèque québécoise © Gridspace, 2019.

Very generously, ELEKTRA also programmed works by young digital artists. Montreal's *somme* collective, comprised of Emma Forgues, Sam Bourgault, Owen Coolidge, Matthew Halpenny, and Matthew Salaciak, recent graduates from the Computational Arts programme at Concordia University, presented its sprawling multifaceted in-process installation *Mycocene* (2019) at the art gallery Oboro. The exhibition is organised as a critical reaction against the Anthropocene, and in favour of a better conceptualisation of technology in greater harmony with nature. To this end, *somme* cultivates mycelium as a crucial medium of communication between species, while using the cell growth to generate sounds via the repurposed refuse found computer hardware.

ELEKTRAXX was a very successful edition with many sold-out performances and a constant buzz around the larger venues. It was clear that the

festival had its loyal publics, both professional and fans of digital art. Evidently, not all festivals share the same structures or ethos. If we consider ELEKTRA in relation to film festivals, for example, the contrasts are notable. There are no awards, no red carpet, no emphasis on glamour, and no official cocktail parties. This difference may be due to the media arts longstanding outsider status in the art world. Its pronounced accent on new technologies has never sat very well with the more conventional contemporary art scene, critics, curators, and artists alike, where much more cultural capital and related glamour tends to reside. Curiously, there remains some reliance on historical conventions of performance in the organisation of the festival's spaces. The works programmed generally conformed to a fixed seated, theatrical or cinematic, spectatorship in the physical arrangement of rows of seats and the front screen that displays the projections, generated live or recorded. However, I have noted above interesting exceptions at ELEKTRA that intimated the possibilities of where such work might lead and what formats might evolve.

The key notion of digital art in this festival was broad but also confined. While the range of digital art included various electronic devices, advanced digital image and sound manipulation and interactivity, it left networked digital social media aside. Perhaps this is an unstated position of ELEKTRA vis-à-vis digital art or the luck of the draw for this edition, nevertheless the paucity of such work was noticed. As in film, sound is often an afterthought in many of these works, characterised as foreboding, moody electronica. Sitting through all the live and recorded performances in the festival, I was not alone in wondering why other approaches to sound were not being explored. Arguably, this may be a current aesthetic tendency that may also fleetingly evolve in other directions.

After two decades, ELEKTRA continues to serve as an important hub for experiencing digital art, robotics, and multimedia performance. The festival integrates internationally renowned digital artists with younger emergent ones, while addressing a very wide swath of approaches and issues engaged by artists in their responses to and with technology.

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## Notes

- [1] <https://www.elektromontreal.ca/>
- [2] 13th International Marketplace for Digital Art (MIAN, 13ème Marché international de l’art numérique), 13-14 June 2019, for more details, see <https://www.elektromontreal.ca/mian>.
- [3] Valerie Lamontagne writes in her 2012 review of the first BIAM, ‘biennale’s exhibitions and events spanned a varied repertoire of technologies associated with media arts including: electronics, digital screens, kinetic and robotic sculptures, generative works, sound art, interactive video installations and more’. (p. 43)
- [4] Thibault 2019.
- [5] See Paul Wells’ report on the city’s strategy for developing downtown (2009).
- [6] In 2002 then Mayor Tremblay initiated a revival project of Montreal’s downtown and the ‘festival city’ project (Melzer 2018, p. 97). The resulting dedicated website for the Quartier des spectacles is <https://www.quartierdesspectacles.com/en/>.
- [7] Its English-language name is the Society for the Technological Arts, <http://sat.qc.ca>.
- [8] For more details on fulldome technology and a catalogue of its productions, see the Fulldome Database at <https://www.fddb.org/fulldome/>.
- [9] To view video clips of Latent Space and for more information on the artist’s projects, see his website at <https://mnclr.com/works>.
- [10] A history of his versions of FEED may be found at the artist’s website at <http://www.kurthentsch-lager.com/portfolio.html>.
- [11] Video clips of the performance may be found at the artist’s website at <https://pulsopulso.com/portfolio/ergonomics/>.
- [12] In the framework of ‘surveillance capitalism’ Cecco addresses similar issues and the continuing controversy over Google’s Smart Sidewalk project in Toronto (2019).