

WORKERS OF THE FUTURE AT THE FRONTIER OF A PIVOTAL WORK: INNOVATION AT WORK

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The Year's Midnight Shadow Box 5, 2011, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, High resolution interactive display with built-in computerized surveillance system, Copyright Antimodular Research

A question of identity

For over ten years now, the Montréal digital scene owes its development to the effervescence and convergence of socio-economic factors and specific policy initiatives which emerged in the 60s. As Québec was marked by the rise of new technologies and interdisciplinary transgressions, it was also immersed in a singular socio-historical and aesthetic context. Montréal was, and remains to this day, the seat of the sedimentation and blossoming of innovative forms linked to so-called media arts, since they also encompass independent cinema and video. These appeared during the deep social changes, an atmosphere of revolt and quest for freedom proper to the *Révolution tranquille* fostered. The major technical innovations, such as the availability of marketed portable video and sound recording devices, encouraged artists and citizens to make their voices heard, consolidated their feeling of identity, and conditioned contemporary creations to participate in the manifestation of a powerful collective imaginary. Here, the use of media as new means of expression and tools of artistic creation can be explained by the population's density within urban agglomerations and geographic isolation, two factors which certainly contributed to promote a highly efficient telecommunication network.

We cannot overemphasize the role that the stakes, both financial and symbolic, of digital culture as a whole represent and constitute within the sphere of the new creative economy. Also, it will be useful to see how the innovation's potential plays a role in digital creation itself and how it partakes in the elabo-

ration and consolidation of a sector that is a central component of the concept of a creative cultural metropolis. The binomial innovation/creation opens the way for new spaces and networks of sociability, a cluster of creative communities made up of innovative nomads.

What is innovation?

As a general rule, innovation emerges when there is an improvement in an already existing product through a higher performing product: here the newness becomes one of the added values to be brought to a research area or a discipline, and to the set of goods, services and shared uses in a chosen context. One can either compare invention and creativity in a relation based on reciprocity and elective affinities, or highlight their distinctiveness: the first is driven by inspiration; the second depends directly on its being applied, or further still, on a notable difference between the process and its result.

That being said, if interpretations regarding its nature differ, innovation is bound by its very nature (often misunderstood), to its context of emergence which may be delayed due to multiple factors (human and non-human), and to its social impact. Its components refer to a change in the object's function and status, the emergence of new ideas and their implementation, in fact, to everything that touches on the notion of progress, be it social, technological, or economic, or even of a gesture that brings an added value to an organization or company.

As for artistic innovation, it would permeate several production spheres, contaminating other work areas through the imagination, games and even creative anarchy. [1]

If innovation is generally associated with the world of industrial research and the emergence of new products and methods revolving around competition and profit seeking, paradoxically, this notion is less present in the art world: yet, aren't values such as self-reliance, freewill, originality and risk-taking, also its *raison d'être*? How do the digital arts metabolize the innovation that influences both the creative cities linked to the new economy?

Digital artist: worker of the future?

A "laboratory artist" [2] or worker of the future, a researcher-expert in his chosen field, the digital artist is changing the face of art by overcoming the physical obstacles which may arise when art meets technologies based on constantly renewed and fluctuating data. The digital artist possesses mixed and non-conventional skills in combination with a very open mind and professional flexibility: he is versatile and knows how to renew himself. By way of science, technology and art as generators of new expressive forms, he can thus exert an influence on the world of affects and the sensible, but also on the dissemination of new theories and new concepts. In the digital arts, innovation is exercised in the invention of dissemination platforms and interactive extension prostheses; the spatio-temporal involvement of the other in the new discursive and textual spaces; architectural reconfigurations by way of light and sound; reactive textiles; new scenographies which fuse real and virtual beings; synesthetic audiovisual projections and performances; the *détournement* of the functionality of everyday objects; novel and poetic combinations between high and low tech.

As Pierre-Michel Menger underlines:

"The arts and the entertainment industry, like all innovation producing and consuming sectors, constantly give rise to new professions and new professional identities, and correlatively, to the redrawing of the boundaries between existing specializations." [3]

One must be cognizant, however, that the digital is still a genre which is subservient to the technical and that this incursion into the territory of others is not all smooth riding, for this new type of researcher-creator must know how:

"to mix academic research, artistic innovation and the valorization of flexible products oscillating between artwork, tool and knowledge." [4]

The paradigmatic shift from the tool to the aesthetic object (is computer-produced art really art?) and the artist's role as the sole master and agent of his work but who works with others - who in a sense become deferred authors - raises questions of an epistemological order. One wonders, and quite rightly so, about the validity and legitimacy of artistic production and the interpretation of works resulting from it; the democratization of their use and the physical, intellectual and emotional implications for the user; their finality and their reception effects, as well as the place of these works within the symbolic field of contemporary art. Digital artists appear to be in a delicate position between two realities - they are part of a communicational aesthetic all the while redeploying the conventions belonging to the visual arts domain proper.

As versatile creators they create visualization devices, reflect on how to more actively integrate the viewer in their creation process and artwork, and adopt a panoply of intellectual positions while working in groups and through shared networks. The digital arts also bring about a feeling of belonging between the author and the viewer, which may be based on a game and action logic: in this case, the work coexists thanks to the physical or virtual, but mutual, participation of the actors. The protocols established by the artists thus lead to a dialogue about the aesthetic, conceptual, game, and bodily aspects, but also about phenomena that involve the viewer's contemplative and imaginative faculties.

It is the case of Melissa Mongiat, [The User] and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. As much in their aesthetic aspect as in their dialogical approach, their works indicate also one dimension that is characteristic of the digital arts which is the dynamics of the exchanges and distribution between various actors and their evolving context.

References and Notes:

1. Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur Métamorphoses du capitalisme* (Paris: Le Seuil et la République des idées, 2002), 7.
2. Jean-Paul Fourmentraux, "L'art partenaire de l'innovation artistique. Mutations du travail et des organisations artistiques avec les NTIC," http://www.observatoire-omic.org/colloque-icic/pdf/fourmentraux1_4pdf (accessed October 13, 2008).
3. Pierre-Michel Menger, *Portrait de l'artiste en travailleur Métamorphoses du capitalisme* (Paris: Le Seuil et la République des idées, 2002), 27.
4. Jean-Paul Fourmentraux, «L'art partenaire de l'innovation artistique. Mutations du travail et des organisations artistiques avec les NTIC. » http://observatoire-omic.org/colloque-icic/pdf/fourmentraux1_4pdf (accessed October 13, 2008).