

## **“Paradigm Shift” (May 2017) Report**

### **Régine Debatty, Nicolas Nova**

#### **A panorama of digital cultures and their logic**

Like other conferences, Paradigm Shift addressed a wide range of topics that primarily approached digital cultures as such: how technologies can be diverted from their original purposes, how artists, designers or architects seek to generate meaning from them. The description of the practices and uses of average users, for example their behaviour on social networks, the use of virtual reality or tangible interfaces has been widely mentioned, both as a fundamental phenomenon in our societies, but also as a source of inspiration for the artists. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the points of view suggested by the speakers are complementary. Journalists (L. Alexander) or researchers (N. Nova) readily adopt a generalist perspective describing new social forms or behaviours that are now common (e.g. in privacy management or in the fears associated with the explosion of the digital age). And at the same time, artists and designers have explained how more exceptional situations (such as the exhibitionist use of webcams or the modification of personal robots such as the Roomba) could nourish singular forms of creation. Even if this combination of points of view wasn't explicitly stated during the talks, it is of interest, as it allows to build a more nuanced and richer perspective on the digital world than the one we are used to read in the media or in the highly caricatural discourse on digital culture.

In parallel with these discussions, a second sub-theme focused on the stakes of diffusion and enhancement of these digital cultures. From creators to journalists, via cultural centres and media leaders to exhibition curators, Paradigm Shift's two days of talks have also given an overview of the issues and ways of doing things that concern everybody; in particular to enable the emergence of these other points of view. Why have an artistic institution that is interested in new media? How to preserve works of digital art that are, by their software-related nature, less robust than other forms of artistic expression? How to talk about projects that are sometimes considered as “technical” by outside observers or that need an understanding of its cultural references? And of course, because of the dematerialized nature of digital, the question of modes of communication proper to digital creation has also been raised in reference to the diversity of possible modalities: temporary exhibitions in museums or at festivals (Haus der elektronischen Künste, Laboral), the link between residency and presentation (Art at Cern), paper publication to overcome the transience of online life while providing a complement to a website (HOLO/Creative Applications), etc. For example, the case HeK, which focuses on the problems of museum conservation of digital projects, was interesting because it demonstrates the relative novelty of such an inquiry. On the other hand, the discussions with the heads of Belgian or Spanish cultural centres have shown the importance of such activities in the urban ecosystem.

Between these two sub-themes - exploration of digital cultures as such and the means to enhance them - the lectures by artists and designers have finally highlighted the reflections on the creative processes themselves: are they any different from other cultural fields? Are there intrinsic specificities to digital? And more broadly, as we saw in the debates between Beatrice Pembroke, Engin Ayaz and Vasilis Charalampidis, would digital creation modes not be relevant in other fields? To address societal issues?

### **Digital is not limited to screens and a “virtual space”**

Unlike other conferences in the field of digital technology, Paradigm Shift has devoted a limited part only to projects and technologies involving screens. This doesn't come as a surprise for the connoisseurs, as so many events and festivals restrict themselves to this medium. At a time where virtual reality is making a comeback due to the comeback of headsets, and the explosion of interest for augmented reality technologies in connection with smartphones, it seems important not to confine the digital to these two interfaces. If artists work on such projects (LaTurbo Avedon, for example, also presented at Paradigm Shift), it is important to show the variety of interfaces and projects that explore other directions: geolocation-based games, gestural and tangible interfaces, sound installations, mapping, etc. The projects shown by the speakers at Paradigm Shift highlighted this diversity, without necessarily devaluing the opportunities and interaction possibilities of projects involving screens. Such an analysis is pertinent as this conference is organized in connection with Mapping Festival, a festival whose origin is explicitly linked to video projection, but which now moves beyond these perspectives, as evidenced by the Disnovation exhibition held during the event. Paradigm Shift goes in the direction of a more general movement experienced by digital cultures that can assert themselves beyond a single mode of perception.

Moreover, and this is a related phenomenon, several speakers have shown the obsolescence of the mythologizing of “virtual space” that was very much present during the last twenty years, as well as the fallacious distinction between a fantasy virtual space and “real space”. The presentation of projects, particularly on the issues of bodies and interfaces by Ghislaine Boddington, has shown the necessity to use other metaphors that are those of hybridization. At the same time, a presentation such as Leigh Alexander's has shown the need to identify and define logics that are specific to digital rather than the mechanical reproduction of the rationales and dynamics of life in our everyday physical environment.

### **Social barriers that still have to be knocked down**

Like technological variety, the make-up of Paradigm Shift's program was of equally significant social diversity. A majority of women and speakers from Turkey and Mexico have been invited to share their perspectives, thoughts and doubts about digital cultures. This plurality of views was reflected in the topics addressed. These speakers emphasized a series of themes not commonly discussed in conferences about technology:

- Particularly striking gender imbalance in the technology community (Sabine Himmelsbach, Ghislaine Boddington, Leigh Alexander and Régine Debatty). Many women feel they are victims of “double standards” and are having difficulties breaking through the “glass ceiling”.
- The need to integrate in the development of or discussions about technology social groups that are normally neglected by contemporary technologies, such as migrant communities (Vassilis Haralambidis), or those left out for economic, geographical or cultural reasons and who are not invited to take an active part in digital creation (Edwina Portacarrero)
- The importance of paying more attention to human aspects such as empathy, compassion or bodily sensations in the development of technologies (Ghislaine Boddington)
- The need to upgrade human and social sciences in education at a time when the world of work and information is being shaken up by phenomena such as automation, the distortion of facts and the rise of “post-truth” or “fake news”, etc. (Lucía García Rodríguez)
- The call for new rhythms and operating procedures more in line with each local culture. For example, favouring a certain “deceleration” in Turkey (Engin Ayaz)

### **The supernatural and mysterious part of digital technologies**

Among the themes that have been raised at the Paradigm Shift presentations there is a more subtle one that has come out on several occasions among various speakers: the fact that we fail to dispense with the supernatural part of technologies. This dimension has emerged both in the presentations dealing with the practices of the users (Leigh Alexander, Nicolas Nova) and the artistic creations inspired by them (Martin Howse, Semiconductor). Whether it is smartphones, electromagnetic waves, video games or social networks, these technological objects are invested with superstitions, beliefs, and even with the magical thought described by anthropologists. As has been seen in some presentations, this abstruseness of technologies is in part linked to a gap between two phenomena. On the one hand, there is the ultra-complexity of technological devices that are often opaque, designed not to be opened or repaired. On the other hand, the way digital players communicate about the ease of use, or the “magic” dimension of their products, suggests that everything will work out smoothly. The current transition from everyday life, which seems simple and accessible, to breakdowns and other frictions, upset this rather relative fluidity.

While this aspect can be potentially problematic, since it generates a mixture of anxiety and incomprehension, it is a fertile material for artistic works that are particularly interested in revealing these hidden dimensions (Semiconductor’s wave visualizations), or ironically portray them in ways that are sometimes just as cryptic (Martin Howse).

## Plurality of the relationship between art and technology

In the world of electronic arts as in the world of contemporary “traditional” art, artists have sometimes radically different objectives when they choose to work with such and such media, whether it is classical sculpture, video, software, 3D or in vitro culture. The presentations by artists and critics invited to share their work and thoughts during the Paradigm Shift forum attest to the richness and diversity of approaches.

First there is a method that touches upon that of “art for art’s sake”. An artist or collective may have ethical, political, social and ecological concerns without, however, feeling the need to transmit them in their work. Thus there are many artists who use the new technologies mainly as tools to move the public, reinvent the relationship between space and visitor, but also to broaden the definitions of aesthetics and forms, notably shown by Félicie d’Estienne d’Orves.

Other artists are motivated by the almost fetishist pleasure of using a new technology or scientific innovation in order to explore and push its limits. The projects shown by Alexander Scholz bear witness of this type of approach, with a resolutely aesthetic dimension. We then find ourselves faced with what we could call “technology for technology’s sake”. Virtual reality and more or less sophisticated artificial intelligence programs seem to be currently among the most attractive technologies for this kind of research.

However, scientific or technical innovation has always been accompanied by a third artistic approach that is more circumspect and critical. Many artists take apart and analyse the promises of innovation. Some, like Martin Howse, have it dialogue with other modes of knowledge in order to attempt a reconfiguration of the relationships between humans and the planet. Others emphasize the insidious, alienating and often latent powers of technology; the Disnovation exhibition, presented during the Mapping Festival, addressed this kind of perspective in an exciting way. This kind of exercise may sometimes be accompanied by a whole series of speculations about the possibility of future abuses and unexpected diversions of these technologies by the public, global corporations or authorities.

Finally, as Régine Debatty pointed out, a growing number of artists choose to face the challenges the society and the world face today, in a more concrete and militant way. They wish to go beyond the snug debates in galleries, overcome the classic dynamics of art and create artworks which they conceive as guides, tools available to the general public in order to act more directly upon social, environmental or political issues.

Obviously, these various categories identified during the Paradigm Shift conferences are not fool-proof. The work of many artists, such as Martin Howse and Semiconductor, often merges several approaches.

The “Revealing the Unseen” panel, realised in collaboration with CERN, also demonstrated the value of encounters between specialized research centre and artists or designers. This type of residence or collaboration allows creators to get

acquainted with advanced scientific and technological processes, knowledge and protocols that would otherwise be difficult to have access to. As for the researchers, they can discover through these exchanges a more humanistic interpretation and questioning about their work. The result of these co-operations often allows research, especially that which sometimes seem abstract or unaffordable, to be communicated to the general public in a more intelligible way, more embedded in everyday life and often more poetic.

### **New moral references, new intergenerational battlegrounds**

At the closing session “Present Future” and during other moments of discussion with the audience, a concern has frequently arisen: over and above the well-known concerns about cyber-harassment, publishing of nude pictures, web-dependence, waves of suicides or the risk of paedophilia, adults worry about not understanding the new rituals and behaviours of the younger generations. Even users who have lived through the prehistory of networks find it difficult to decipher the new norms of behaviour, politeness, and tacit rules of interaction deployed by younger generations. And today’s consumer Internet is certainly very different from that of twenty years ago.

In particular, for most of the “digital natives”, anonymity as we see it seems a strange and out-dated concept. According to the discussions at Paradigm Shift, it is less a loss of the notion of privacy than a redefinition of it. In many ways, teenagers show better control of the networks and their online image than adults. It was pointed out that the Snapchat platform is very popular among teenagers and young adults not only for its playful aspects but also because the platform is not yet “invaded” by their parents. But this case is also interesting because the operation mode respects the “right to forget”: the shared data is not archived thereby allowing the users to protect spontaneity and personal relationships from future looks or the curiosity of people not strictly belonging to their intimate circle.

The exchanges thus have made it possible to realize that this notion of protection of privacy is more selective and fragmented than the one traditionally put forward. The younger generations distinguish between audiences and present a different version of themselves depending on the platform used. As a result, certain aspects of their private life are revealed to certain groups of people and remain secret to others.

Another behaviour that seems disconcerting to adults is how adolescents, especially young women, build themselves an online identity that is not exactly in line with the reality of their appearance or behaviour. As noted by Leigh Alexander, the use of filters is sometimes pushed to its height with practices such as the “Instagram eyebrow” and other make-up techniques created to be seen almost solely on selfies published on the famous picture and video-sharing platform.

In the same way, selfies are often perceived as a sign of extravagant narcissism of the younger generations. However they are often simply attempts to control their image at a time when our actions and reactions online are reduced to a set of metadata whose use is beyond our control. It is therefore less about self-indulgence than about attempts to experiment with identity, to control one’s online image and assert a sense of belonging to a social group. Moreover, the younger generations understand that this virtual presence does not necessarily have to be the perfect

replica of physical life, but may have a specific nature that involves interplay between the reality of their existence and the potentials they portray.

In conclusion, the debates on these issues during the forum seem to rely on the assumption that we are not faced with serious excesses by teenagers but with a time that requires a re-evaluation, an adaptation of our traditional moral codes and our concept of protection of privacy. However, learning to unmask false information and to better control the future impact of online reputation remains nevertheless necessary.