# Entretien avec Filipe Pais

**Julie Aubry-Tirel** and **Marie Canova Ilmensky**

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## OUTLINE

## TEXT

# First exchange

**RadaR– So, to introduce, you are an artist, a researcher, and a curator, working on new technologies, using and "mixing" these different perspectives to observe and examine how they affect and shape our behavior, and our social and cultural rules. Your exhibition "_From Bits To Paper_ (http://www.shadok.strasbourg.eu/projets/from-bits-to-paper-exposition/)"is both a reappropriation of this news technologies, and a decontextualisation, which allows us to stand back on our daily uses of it. More than just a theoretic reflection, this also invites us to experiment how this digital tools affect us, shape us, everyday, by immersion and renewed interactions. For one time, we can touch it as they "touch" us? I mean, in a different way than our daily practices (not just as a slide on our smartphone). […]**

**Filipe Pais**– We are in 2017 and technologies have an unprecedented effect (and power) over our lives and on the ways we communicate and interact with others. They have infiltrated our personal space and the most intimate aspects of human nature. For instance, technologies are now capable of understanding and collecting feedback about how we feel at a certain moment of the day, what we might be thinking on, how do we find a partner, what kind of person we might be attracted to, but they are also making astonishing progresses in guessing about what will happen in our lives in the near future. This is at the same time fascinating and scary for most of us.

My interest by the overlapping between technologies, art and design stems from this fascinating power held by certain artworks that amaze, engage and immerse the participant, opening new regimes of sensorial and aesthetic experience. Although, I was mesmerized by them, I also developed mixed feelings of boredom and surprised by the ways some artists were suddenly using the same codes, discourse and design strategies used by mainstream and standard technologies. I'm not referring to pioneers because these were actually opening up new forms of expression and technological development that were later absorbed by tech companies. Although, as I see it, the so-called digital art has been putting forward what Rafael Lozano-Hemmer would call "a technological correctness view". In many exhibitions I've been visiting during the last years, artists invite us to touch, to jump or use complex gestures that will trigger different ludic and sensorial experiences. Most of the times, these are very enriching experiences, although they fail to bring us any kind of reflection about some of the most complex issues of our times. Here I'm thinking about the general idea of how transparency, eye candy and smooth design work to keep the user focused and engaged (not in a political sense!) but in the same process they obfuscate a complex mechanism that have strong social and political impact.

This is the trigger that fed the reflection at the origin of the exhibition "From Bits to Paper". This exhibition invites you to enter a black box (literally) and to discover what's going on within this opaque world that is nevertheless always there, like the air we breathe, permeating all our exchanges.

Unlike "sliding and swiping on your smart phone screen" which is in most situations an unconscious action, the artists presented on this show ask us to actually concentrate in our daily actions but also on the mechanisms running behind the curtain, creating an understanding on how they work.

**RadaR– […] By saying that, we can think that this project is "just" an analogue-to-digital conversion reversal, and the title plays on this idea. But, it appears to me more as a mix between two aesthetics, analogue and digital, than a conversion. We interact with the different works of art that are very concrete, tangible, but organized and curated in a way that makes me think about how new**

**platform of storage and diffusion, like I-cloud, Tumblr, Scoop it working... What do you think about that?**

**Filipe Pais** – Rematerializations can be very literal or very abstract. The proposals presented in this show are quite different so I don't think this is just about "a simple conversion reversal". But let me just explain what I mean by rematerialization. As I see it, a rematerialization is the action of materializing something that was already material. A lot of technological discourses and agendas talk about "immateriality" when addressing operative systems, icons or the internet in general. Well, I think this is not very helpful when talking about the digital because there's always a material dimension that supports a certain digital image or sound. Just think about the amount of submarine cables needed to connect the US and Europe so you can access your google account, and all the servers requires to keep your emails in good hands. Can we really talk about immateriality?

But coming back to the idea of rematerialization... Think about the street art by the French artist Invader (http://www.space-invaders.com/home/), who decided to rematerialize the game characters found inside "Space Invaders" (a game by Taiko from 1978) and spread them all over Paris during the 90's. Or more recently the work by the German artist Aram Bartholl which is using this idea of rematerialization as his key tactic.

Invader, *Space Invader*, installation de dessins (mosaïques), Ljubjana ( Slovénie), 2006

These rematerializations are in fact reversing the concept of remediation. This concept by Richard Grusin and Jay Bolter explains that digital media is constantly remediating its predecessors. For example, the CD remediates the vinyl or the e-book remediates the book. But also while designing an interface, UI designers constantly use metaphors of "real world" such as trashcans, windows, folders that ease the adaptation and interaction with that interface. This "digitalization of the world" is then reversed here working as a counter-strategy that I call rematerialization. Once again, some of them might be too literal or might be easy jokes that will make us smile or laugh for a brief moment, but others are capable of producing some reflection that enables us to go beyond the laughter and understand how technological systems actually work and affect us. This is clear in most of the works presented but I would like to call the attention for *My Google Search History* by Alber-

tine Meunier, _de_dust_ (http://www.datenform.de/dusteng.html) by Aram Bartholl or 204_No _Content_ by Darko Fritz.

My original goal was to only show works that don't need any kind of digital support, so the exhibition would only display works made with paper, cardboard, wood or other non-digital materials. I wanted to bring forward the idea that these works can really create an insight about the digital worlds we live in and with, even though they don't use any digital mediums. Then the task became a little bit hard and I had to open some exceptions.

This show started as a collection on a wordpress blog which is still available on my website. Although, the selection was made to convey an overall meaning, in order to provide different experiences and trigger some reflections. I believe that some of these proposals might be directly grasped as we visit the blog yet, this selection attains its full meaning when the works are presented in front of you and are physically present. The exhibition presents three different zones which are interconnected, a first one called "making things visible", a second one called "on google" and the third one "memory". There is no fixed path but wandering around this darkened "blackboxed" space will convey something that you are rarely able to experience while scrolling the saturated spaces of Tumblr and other similar plat- forms. I'm a little bit skeptical when it comes to curatorship and online platforms. Most blogs and tumblrs we have available seem to be mainly working as displays that list content but not as meaning- making structures. Nevertheless they are amazing treasure boxes for curators.

**RadaR– By the way, it makes me think about the status of "curator". It's an old world, with a rich etymology and different senses, in English and in French, but it has known a "revival" this ten last years, both in the sector of art and museology, and in digital marke- ting and communication. Plus, it seems linked to the new technolo- gies development and theirs own formats, based on "curation content", as they say, which means on the aggregation of different samples of sounds, images, texts etc... working like the process of digitization in a way, based on sampling: So, my last question is: as a curator, would you say your work is a form of sampling? And/or**

**that the recently emerged figure of curator is linked to the digitization of art?**

**Filipe Pais**– I just stepped in, so I'm quite new to the world of curation but once I was a DJ during some years. As a DJ you are not only making people dancing to entertain them, there's much more to that. You are conveying meaning by each musical choice you make, you are transmitting values and forming communities around the dance floor. As a curator I don't see much of a difference. You don't just gather artworks in a space so people can move around and get entertained, there's a lot more. As I see it, the exhibition is a space-time for meaning making process that opens new perceptual experiences and new understandings of the world you live in. Even if you are selecting "samples" of reality (or realities), you are assembling them in certain ways so that they exist together and create new meanings that surpasses their individual existence. An exhibition is not only a physical assemblage of artworks, people, lights, plinths, spectators, curators, artists and museum staff. I see them as conceptual tools that enable the articulation of ideas and concepts that are sometimes hard to express and grasp by using words or photos. So yes, we might be able to speak about sampling. Although, the different samples (artworks) selected were supposed to come together and create a meaningful system or composition.

The way things run today change the way the curator becomes aware of artists and their works but also the way he plans the exhibition. Most of the works I have presented in "From bits to Paper", were actually found on the internet in different blogs and artists' web pages. We know how photos can sell you something else than the image that got stuck in your brain but this is a risk the curator needs to run. Moreover, I'm convinced that this is actually part of the aesthetics deliberately conveyed by some contemporary shows that have emerged around the globe during the last years. Finally, in my view, the curator "as a sampler" is not a digital native. The curator always used samples by summoning different artworks thus, sensible fragments of our reality that gather to create new realities.

# Second exhange

RadaR– I propose to go on the "ideal of immateriality" which haunts digital technologies, and is probably bound by the human desire of immortality. Digital technologies aren't immaterial: they are fragile, manipulable, alterable, shareable, alterable... Indeed, I think it is really important to be aware of all the materials and the energy necessary for our technology to develops and grows (you speak about theses gigantic and strong cables which cross the earth and its seabed, we can also mention data centers which produce so much heat that scientists try to find solutions to they stop disturb the ecosystem they occupy...). A lot of different questions "grow" because of this singular materiality, which is both fragile and huge, ever-present and half-visible.

Thes digital technologies and their softwares affect us, change us and our environment. Their own materiality makes us "responsible" of these impacts, beacause we are using technologies every day. We have to think about it. But, to impose an other moralizing discourse is neither interesting nor useful, and maybe digital art – and the way we share it – could make us aware of our responsibilities without paralyse us[1] It makes me think about a quote from Rebecca Solnit that I've read on a website, few months ago: "I *still thinking that the real revolution consists in making the world a haven for poetry and vagrancy, the rare and the dark, the unrealizable, the local and the small.*" Actually, when I visit artists blog such as Rosa Menkman's or yours, I can see how digital art and its curation are trying to build and to discover particular spaces for poetry, digression and critic. In this way, artists aren't using technologies to go faster, further, lengthily... How could these experimentations and these works allow us (spectators and users) to go beyond our simple fascination for digital technologies, interactive immersion (and virtual reality), for we could use theses tools to imagine and create more responsible way of living, sharing, playing? As the curators create contents and imagine articulations between practices and works, how could they immerse us without submerge us, while exposing works that can be very attractive? [...]

Filipe Pais – What do you mean by digital art that paralyse us?

I personally like digital artworks that "paralyse us" or ask us to stay steady and contemplate. This reminds me of the concept of "Inter-Inactivity" by Nadeau and Lewis. The authors bring forward the idea that one is actually able to trigger a certain actions and experience by suspending interaction. This is a simple but very symbolic gesture that comments on the contemporary quest for total interactivity.

I don't think artists (at least good ones) try to show us what our responsibilities are or try to impose us any kind of moral. I wouldn't put in the same bucket the intention of an artist showing us a fragment of reality and his/her point of view, together with the intention of moralising us and make us better and responsible citizens. Artists have been sensible to a very broad range of issues along history but I have the feeling that when they start playing with the codes from the systems of power they are often tagged as moralistic. In the exhibition *From bits to paper*, some of the artists are openly teasing and playing with GAFA actors but all have them propose a sensible experience that is open and polysemic and is detached from any moralistic agenda.

Rosa Menkman has been exploring the aesthetics of glitch both in practice and theory, she is interested by how glitch transforms the artwork into a form of "unstable utterance of counter aesthetics", a critical media object that gives the opportunity to "critique the conventions of the medium". (Menkman, 2009, p. 4) She provides good examples of visual poetry and interesting ways of using the anomalies of digital technologies. Although I rarely find the opportunity to see them as elements that critique the conventions the medium. Artists and designers understood that they could do interesting/attractive visuals and sound compositions with glitch and system errors so they are now part of our popular musical and visual landscapes. They have become commodified as many re-materializations did by the way. Many pixel sculptures or copies of Aram Bartholl's Map have been seen around lately, and they are out of the gallery in shopping malls or places alike.

Artists have been doing a great job in helping us sharing and playing together within very different types of installations and participatory artworks since the 50's or even before. If some of these were able to create consciousness about different societal issues while playing and

having an immersive experience, a lot of contemporary artistic experiences with technologies are way too smooth. Today we are offered playful experiences in every corner, play is an element that engages people thus is widely used to keep the attention of users and consumers. In this sense, play needs to be carefully revisited by artists. As I see it, interactive immersion and virtual reality can create very interesting experiences today but they should be able to produce more distancing effects (to use Brechtian terminology) in order to mirror their own medium but also to allow the participante to see beyond the surface.

"Immerse" and "submerge" seem to mean more a less the same but I guess I get your point. Probably you mean "immersed" without getting "drowned"? I would like to avoid talking in the name of other curators or give other curators recommendations but personally I don't want to immerse spectators because we are all already enveloped by this continuous flow of information that is not only immersing us but is more about to drown us. *From bits to paper* is then an attempt to create an anti-environment that interrupts this flow, and creates a friction instead of stimulating a smooth addictive immersion.

This doesn't mean that immersion is incompatible with a visceral and reflective experience. In the case of the exhibition FBTP it's just part of the overall aesthetics of disconnection, leakage from the digital and dysfunction.

**RadaR– To stay around the question of the digital materiality, I wonder about these images, noises, games and videos which can not be anything other than digital contents and which have to be listened or seen with computers, by using softwares. How do you interact, as a young curator and internet user, with these works, images, musics, informations which can not exist elsewhere than on the internet or social networks? What kind of process do you imagine to allow them to be "meaning-making structures" and not simple floating data, and to articulate them together?**

**Filipe Pais**– Even though I'm not a specialist I see internet art as a very interesting genre because it's accessible anytime and anywhere. Internet doesn't have closing and opening hours or admission ticket and it's available to anyone that has an internet connection and some

kind of interface. I believe these projects extend a dream that I have since a long time: make art accessible to everyone. Although I wonder what happens in reality. Without knowing any numbers I would risk to say that most of net art projects are seen by a very small amount of people when we think about the global scale. The problem is that as in IRL, we have these filter bubbles that maintain us closed into our confort zone. I wonder how many people out there have heard about the Jodi collective (http://wwwwwwww.jodi.org/) or Ubermorgen (http://www.ubermorgen.com/UM/index.html)... Despite the accessibility these projects still remain in the underground of the web.

Right now I don't have a lot of clues but I definitely think smart-phones are a very fertile terrain to explore. We have physical museums, so we could definitely have applications that are actually working as museums which periodically feature shows by different invited curators.

Maybe this already exists, at least it seems the logical sequence for web museums and net art exhibitions online. We have plenty of websites that feature net art or apps developed by artists but a dynamic app-museum with a good design and agenda would be an interesting project to do.

Otherwise, I'm a big fan of Aram Bartholl's *Speed Shows*. Bartholl is actually occupying internet cafés in different cities and invites different artists to show their work in each computer available. As a result, the internet café is temporarily transformed into gallery.

**RadaR– Before we continue this mailing interview, let's speak a few about Aram Bartholl's *Speed Shows* to our readers. Firstly, I suggest to visit this website (http://speedshow.net/%5D), which presents documents about these *Speed Shows* (photography mostly). Conceived in June 2010 by the artist and curator Aram Bartholl (1972, Germany), this exhibition format tends « *to create a gallery like opening situation for browser based internet art in a public cyber-cafe or internet-shop for one night* », for free and to anyone. The curator proposes with this exhibition to create, or rather to specify a space-time of sharing, a roaming connection which "geolocalized" these net artworks and their exhibition, and then removed them elsewhere...**

## NOTES

1  After the following question of Filipe Pais, I realize this sentence is ambiguous. When I write that *digital art could make us aware of our responsabilities without paralyze us*, I don't mean that they are actually do paralysing us – with moralizing or submersive discourses. What I mean is that technologies – and so *art* – can do both: they can awaken us, trouble us, interrogate us or on the contrary they can slumber, flatter us.

## ABSTRACT

**Français**
Cette section est dédiée à une série de réflexions échangées avec l'artiste-chercheur Filipe Pais, qui s'intéresse, à travers ses différentes pratiques, à l'influence des technologies sur les humains et leurs comportements. Commissaire de l'exposition *From Bits To Paper*, qui s'est tenue du 8 mars au 5 juin 2016 au Shadok (Strasbourg), c'est à partir de sa relation au *curating* que commencent nos échanges. Cette interview s'est construite par mails, pour qu'elle puisse évoluer en fonction des réponses, sans pré-texte, comme une conversation qui traverse différents thèmes soulevés par ce premier numéro de RadaR. Elle s'attache aux technologies numériques et analogiques, aux artistes qui s'en saisissent et les détournent, et aux comportements curatoriaux qui apparaissent alors.
Cet échange de mail se poursuivra encore quelques jours ou semaines après la mise en ligne de la revue.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés**
curation, détournement, image, numérisation, virtuel

## AUTHORS

**Julie Aubry-Tirel**
À la croisée des genres, Julie Aubry-Tirel s'intéresse aux liens entre esthétique, éthique et politique, questionnant en particulier la place du corps, de l'imaginaire et des normes dans les représentations contemporaines. Elle porte un intérêt

particulier aux domaines du soin et de la santé dans une perspective féministe et décoloniale.
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/265155169

**Marie Canova Ilmensky**
Après trois années de licence en Arts plastiques, Marie « Canovsky » se spéciale dans l'analyse du dessin en tant qu'outil d'expression fondamental et introspectif. Fraîchement diplômée du Master Arts Plastiques Recherche qu'elle valide à Strasbourg, elle rejoint le Master Critique-Essais en septembre 2015. Cette année sera pour elle l'occasion d'étudier de très près d'autres modes d'expression artistique liés à l'erreur, à la subversion et au détournement.
Parallèlement à la critique, Marie Canovsky s'investit dans le dessin et la bande-dessinée, et participe activement aux actions de l'association Central Vapeur (Strasbourg).
IDREF : https://www.idref.fr/265755271