Abstract
In this paper, we present Projet EVA’s artworks that focus on the interaction between social, synthetic and biological systems, outlining the inherently restrictive and subtractive aspects of the increasingly technological environment in which humans are situated. For over 10 years, we have used detournement strategies to explore the entanglements of digital technologies with human activities and psyches. In an attempt to suggest alternative modes of understanding these problematics, the Projet EVA collective has made transgressive use of media in order to ultimately build a critical discourse on how technology informs social and psychological realities. The different projects presented in this paper illuminate EVA’s singular approach to interaction design, one that produces experiential art that challenges the expectations of its discipline.

Keywords
interactivity, participation, intervention, transgression, mind control, relational aesthetics, immersion, game, augmented reality, surveillance

Glitches and Hitches
As teachers back in the early 2000s, it was common for us to see undergrads — upon coming to the realization that, on a computer system, sound and video ultimately amount to 0s and 1s — develop projects in which sound generated video, or vice versa. At that time, we shared a similar enthusiasm for the intertwining of different structures. However, rather than enabling one set of data to control another expressive structure, we sought to mix heterogeneous data structures or control systems and throw a party. This led to such projects as the unsuccessful Nuées, where cockroaches would be used to display video portraits. Spamspasmes (2003) saw a performer’s skin pierced by hooks that were attached and pulled by a large pneumatic machine; a digital control structure made the skin move and behave in a totally mechanical way. These involuntary and “unnatural” glitches ultimately underscored the uneasiness produced by the transposition of machine behaviour onto the human body.

These projects remain experiments that unfold as representations or demonstrations. The public is grossed out or excited by this freak show but remains estranged from it all, comfortably going through this moment as a spectator of late 1990s/early 2000s, Stelarc-inspired man-machine art.

In fact, we realized that our artistic intentions had to push past the strict context of media arts. Rather than concern ourselves with disciplinary-specific topics, we turned to philosophical and aesthetic problematics similar to those developed as early as the beginning of the 20th century by the Dadaists, Futurists and later on by Fluxus. What these early harbingers of man-machine art questioned was the relationship of the spectator to the work, its social significance and, globally, the further advancement of the anti-art critique. We developed our work to investigate these topics more thoroughly, through technology and its media derivatives.

A Subtractive Aesthetic
In order to integrate artistic propositions into social environments that are not dedicated art spaces, we create works that play with the social conventions of public spaces and that include passersby in the piece. For example, in On va tous y passer (2009), we wanted to incorporate the “normal” behaviour of individuals in these shared contexts as integral to the work. On va tous y passer is a video surveillance monitor set in a typical public transit locale. The incoming video feed is analyzed by custom software so that once an individual is isolated from the others, his or her image disappears, leaving the rest of the crowd and its surrounding environment.

By having members of the “audience” disappear, this deceptive mirror acts as an instance of subtractive aesthetics. Instead of augmenting a visual feed with computer-generated content, we focus on the elimination of a specific aspect of an image. Therefore, the piece revolves around “not showing” and disturbs the expected operation of a security device, allowing us to exploit
people’s sense of being. Exploring the fundamental disjuncture between one’s presence in the space and one’s perceived absence within the representation of that space, the work highlights the fleeting nature of the social creature who is the passerby.

The piece worked best as presented in Lebanon in 2009 during Les Jeux de la Francophonie, where we were told on numerous occasions that people actually disappear, therefore tapping directly into the collective experience of surveillance and social control. By singling out individuals and erasing them in real time, *On va tous y passer* inverts the traditional role of the surveillance system, which is to procure an impression of security through monitoring and recording.

This anxiogenic device marked a turning point in our practice, as it was the first time we took a clear stand against the augmentation paradigm that is pervasive in the world of digital art. Instead of assuming that technology enhances human experience, our work started from the standpoint of the limitations of artificial systems. We began to create works that highlight the poverty of the existential conditions created for biological systems by hybrid technological aggregates, as well as the behavioural transformations that would occur in such environments.

This Is No Game can be linked to relational aesthetics, as conceptualized by Nicolas Bourriaud[1]. The piece establishes a situation that provokes social interactions, which are the artistic substrate of the piece. The relation to the other through mediatization, explored within a “game” social context, is the basis of the project. This Is No Game distances itself from core relational aesthetics through its perversion of social dynamics. The restrictive aspect of the avatars' suits, the delocalization provided by the radio frequency (RF) video signal and the derealization produced by real-time video processing are basically communicative hurdles limiting positive social interactions imagined by technophile.

Most participants referred to this project as a game, even though the title clearly asserts that it is not one. One of the reasons we specifically chose the title *This Is No Game* is that this project in fact uses game mechanics to convey its proposition, but, contrary to projects such as Can You See Me Now from Blast Theory, we do not enthusiastically advocate mediated/augmented reality[2]. Instead, we investigate how such an apparatus might skew ethical judgment and social behaviour.

The lack of an apparent goal and the openness of its game mechanics make This Is No Game a very different experience from projects that propose outdoor, life-size games. We have often seen “players” of This Is No Game turn into real-life trolls and break social codes of polite conduct.

In conception and practice, the project offers a critique of augmented reality systems. Proponents tend to imagine augmented reality in terms of its potential to “add” to natural systems (perception, experience, interactions with nature and people). Our projects play at the sites of the possible failure of such a proposal. It is difficult to believe that augmented reality wearables do not violently modify the behaviour of those wearing them, up to the point where there is a sizable loss in terms of freedom of action and cognitive capacities or the quality of social interaction itself. This Is No Game explores this concept by producing what could be called a diminished reality system.

**A Perversion of Relational Aesthetics**

In This Is No Game (2008-2011), we push further the notion of limiting percepts and skewing precepts. This performance project relies on two performers whose bodies are covered with a protective suit that completely blocks out vision and limits hearing. The actions of the performers are controlled by remote gamers who have access to live video feed being streamed from cameras affixed to their helmets.

In this context, the performers truly become “meat puppets,” with no choice but to blindly obey the players. The relationship between these “avatars” and their controllers becomes perverted by the pleasure that the latter might get from driving their “character” into potentially harmful or dangerous situations.

**Invasion and Impregnation**

With *Cinétose* (2012), our next project, we wanted to coerce the public into a somatic interaction with a mechanistic system. We ended up with a large-scale electromechanic installation that is comprised of steel sheets used as both sound instruments and scenic apparatus. Attached to a mobile grid above the audience, the large steel plates perform a series of movements while descending toward the public, eventually forcing spectators to lie flat on the floor.

The first version of the project, *Répétition pour la fin du monde* (2005), began as a reflection on interaction design that involved large crowds within the context of an interactive show. We were unsatisfied with statistical processing techniques usually employed. We find that these methods tend to create unintelligible relationships...
among the crowd, the scenic apparatus and the performer, inducing distance and generating a very limited emotional engagement with the piece. Attempting to move beyond those dynamics, we decided to create some kind of metallic “net” equipped with piezoelectric sensors and pneumatic actuators to use as an “interface” with the crowd. By having this apparatus drop down on people and letting them act upon it, we would create a sound performance where the interplay between the public and the metallic structure would constitute the material of the piece.

Later, we improved on this proposition by better formalizing the structure and concept into Cinétose. Focusing on the inclusion of robotics as an expressive element evolving beyond the simple role of a dissimulated mechanical theater actuator, we became interested in studying the spatial relationship that would be established between the overarching robotic structure and the public.

At first glance, the metallic structure shares the functions of sound production and set dressing. However, our main intent was to use the apparatus as a space-shaping device. We aimed for a proposal influenced by Edward T. Hall’s proxemics[3], which divides space into two general categories: Cinétose’s metallic structure would creep from the distance, the territory, to an up-close personal space where the spectators would develop a direct, quasi-tactile relationship with the piece.

Rosalind Krauss[4], in her 1986 essay on Richard Serra, employs Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception to describe a treatment of space that relies on a physical rather than an optical perception. The work of art is transposed from its traditional visual context to a purely haptic one where the seer and the seen are intermingled. This blurring of boundaries is Cinétose’s ultimate effect, as the public lays on the floor confused, breathing, next to a stranger, having nothing to look at, being stuck “looking in” to find remnants of the spectacle.

Cinétose, throughout the duration of the performance, shifts the locus of representation. In the first minutes of the show, the metallic ceiling is poised high above the audience. The crowd, gathered underneath, looks at it from afar and sees the different patterns of activation of the grid accompanied by a corresponding light and sound score. But as the ceiling lowers onto people, the distance between what we would normally refer to as the FOH (front of house) and the stage shrinks. As the public starts to feel the wind generated by the movement of the steel sheets, the heat of the lights and the shock waves of the hits of the pneumatic structures, the public gradually stops “looking at” the art and starts feeling it in a much more somatic manner. The grid lowers close to a point of contact, where people are forced to lie on their backs and negotiate with neighbours for some room on the floor. At that point, the performance’s different expressive channels (light, sound, mechanics) become asynchronous to a point of contradiction. The spectator’s typical perception of space, sound and light thus becomes troubled and the perceptual engagement with the immediate surrounding is uprooted. In terms of proxemics, the piece carries itself into the audience by entering their affective space.

Mind Control

Nous sommes les fils et les filles de l’électricité (NSFFDE), currently in progress, is one of our latest projects. It is a hybrid between performance, live participative theatre and digital art. Inspired by mind-control experiments financed by the CIA in the 1950s (especially the Allan Memorial Institute in our hometown of Montreal, Canada), the aim of this project is to orchestrate a disorienting spectacle that explores ideas of private and cultural identity, the politics of a collective future and the dynamics of power.

Proposing a reflection on identity and the alienation of collective memory in contemporary society, we conceived a novel interactive apparatus that would produce a stronger hold on the public’s psyche. This will be achieved by localizing, as much as possible, the mechanics of the piece inside the participants’ heads. This project marks a departure from previous works as it excludes any notion of physical spatiality. Social games and audiovisual trauma will constitute the main components of the experience.

In NSFFDE, a limited number of people are invited to take part in a play where there are no actors, only spectators[5]. The spectators are seated, facing one another. A video system projects images, or “masks,” onto their faces. Throughout the duration of the “play,” participants are given private audio directives such as behaviours and utterances that they must perform. Thus, the actual expressive material of the piece lies within the behaviours and attitudes of the participants, in conjunction with the directives formulated in real-time by the system. The end result has yet to be discovered, but we seek to accomplish the goals listed below.

Further penetrate the minds of the public

The spectator’s utterances are both estranged and highly personal. Because they are externally induced and not thought-out words, the sentences enacted by the participants feel distanced and do not originally bear any identification with the body that produces them. Yet,
because they are spoken by this body through a somewhat ritualistic and repetitive process, we hypothesize that this technique might, after a certain time, induce an effective identification process. In NSFFDE, participants voluntarily take part in the piece and submit to the “rules of the game.” The subordinate volitions that guide the behaviours of our spect-actors are, however, prompted by the system that directs them. By enacting the roles that are cast upon them, the participants might eventually identify with these externally prompted directives and incorporate them as inner-directed attitudes and feelings, in a manner similar to what William James[6] describes as the “conscious experience of emotion.”

TRAPicipation?
NSFFDE shares similarities with participatory theatre. In a manner akin to Roger Bernat[7], we are not really interested in fiction and theatricality. Rather than programming a series of images and representations that unfold as a coherent discourse meant to be passively received by spectators, we simply work to make up a context in which participants are situated and ideally brought to some kind of awareness of the topics that interest us. However, it must be noted that the extra-territoriality of spectatorship (the inclusion of the spectator’s body within the piece and the enactment by the latter of the play) does not aim at emancipating the spectator from his or her traditional passivity. On the contrary, NSFFDE works as a metaphor for a hypercapitalist society and sets a context where interactivity and collectivity are deployed in a superficial manner. In truth, participants are meant to experience both solitude and loss of self-identity. The apparent dialogue and communal exchange taking place in the performance are in fact a mere collection of atomized behavioural traits acting to dissolve the social cement. Behind the infinite potential for self-expression lie the technocapitalist tools of a new, soft totalitarianism. As Marcuse put it in 1964:

“...In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference[8].”

Contextualizing this assessment within our practice, Projet EVA strives to create works that trouble the inherited assumptions of interactive arts and that challenge the complacency engendered by typical experiences of spectatorship.

### References

### Authors’ Biographies
Projet EVA is an art collective that was founded in 2003 out of a shared objective of creating critical, experimental and transgressive artworks in the new media sphere. The scope of the collective’s artistic activities spans robotics, electronics, video and audio. Projects are connected by the themes of loss and restriction and focus on problematics related to relationships among individuals, computer systems and their physical extensions. Projet EVA’s productions have been presented in Asia, Europe, South and North America and the Middle East.

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