Art and Design Make Sense of Innovation

New technologies provide unprecedented performance. Art and design imagine uses for them, giving them an expression which resonates with our daily lives. They also offer a critical look, essential to their relevance. But how does one encourage collaboration between scientists and artists? On September 6th, the EPFL+ECAL Lab, the EPFL design research centre, will present the results of the major European STARTS program (Science, Technology & the Arts) at Ars Electronica.

In 1919, the Bauhaus embraced the new industrial production methods to reinvent our relationship to living space, work environments and objects. Whereas the applied arts and architecture played an important role, many artists had a major influence, including Itten, Klee and Kandinsky. The Bauhaus became an artistic movement which changed our daily lives forever and contributed to the adoption of many technological revolutions.

A hundred years later, contemporary art is experiencing a period of speculative euphoria. But it is difficult to identify a movement that unites art and technology for the benefit of society. Many technologies, such as augmented reality, are used case by case, but are not driven by an innovation movement capable of reflecting a social evolution. *"This is not only a loss of meaning, but also an economic loss"*, says EPFL+ECAL Lab Director Nicolas Henchoz. *"It limits sustainable use and adoption by a wide audience"*.

The EPFL+ECAL Lab was one of the actors in the European STARTS program (Science, Technology & the Arts), with partners such as the Centre Pompidou, the IRCAM and the Fraunhofer Institut in Germany. Thanks to the European Commission, this program has funded 45 artist residencies dedicated to innovation. But above all it has developed a global methodology, as well as tools to facilitate their implementation. Finally, it observed their impact, taking into account the many initiatives launched by other institutions.

The findings and tools which emerged from STARTS are now available to industry and public and private institutions. The synthesis, written by the EPFL+ECAL Lab and published by MIT Press this summer, was selected among the academic contributions to the Siggraph conference which gathered more than 18,000 people in Los Angeles from IT and computer graphics circles, including the Hollywood industry.

In Europe, the EPFL+ECAL Lab will present these findings at the Ars Electronica Festival in Linz on September 6th. The methodology developed addresses how to create common objectives between engineers and artists, to legitimize each participant's contribution, and to facilitate the emergence of powerful ideas. The findings also show how an electronic platform may contribute to tackling this issue, while emphasizing the importance of human mediation.

A major step has just been taken towards building a bridge across disciplines. However, according to Nicolas Henchoz, the main author of the publication, we are still far from having an impact comparable to that of the Bauhaus: *"Those responsible for innovation are drowned in a diversity of practices, between artist residencies, design research, design thinking and other approaches. Each of these practices has a different impact. It is essential to clarify these for the interaction between art and technology to yield tangible benefits"*. A desire for international collaboration emerges from the work in progress. In this context, the EPFL+ECAL Lab pursues the development of an original approach, which combines not only art, science and design, but also psychology, to give innovation a sustainable and social dimension, based on a better understanding of human perception

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