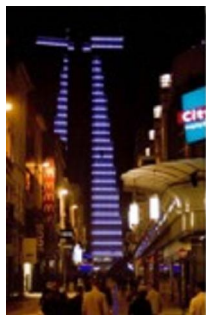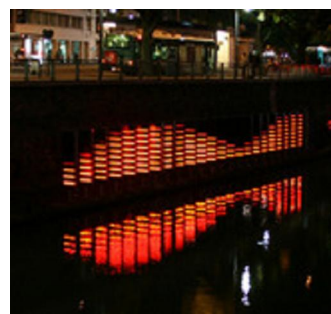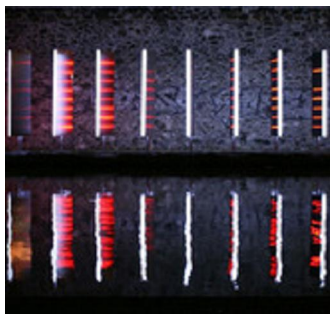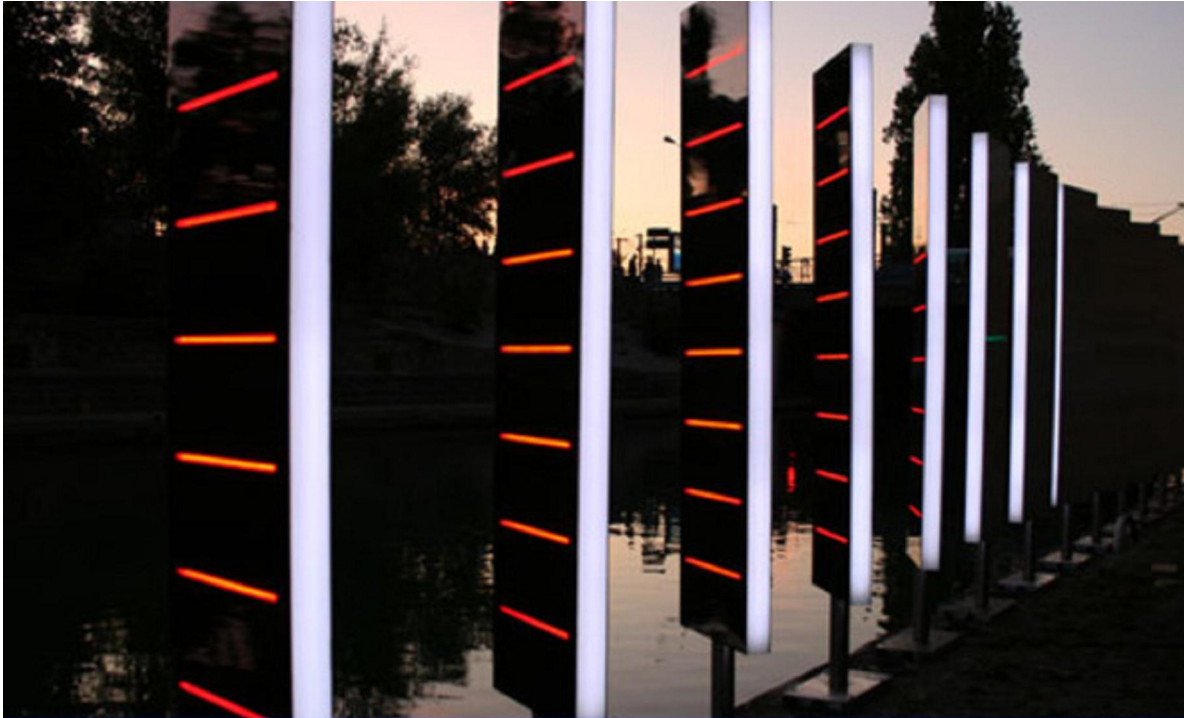# The Creators Project

Systems Art and MetaDesign: The New Frontier of Art, Architecture and Design

by Julia Kaganskiy June 06, 2011
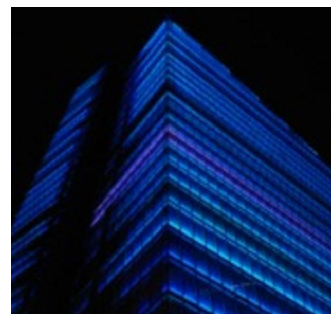
Fresh from our triumphant four-day exhibition in Lyon for Nuits sonores, The Creators Project is taking over Paris and the Gaîté lyrique from Thursday onwards. We'll be debuting several digital installations and films in France (including the French premiere of Spike Jonze's short *Scenes From The Suburbs*), as well as holding what we expect to be two really great parties.

But we're not just there to party. In collaboration with the Gaîté, we'll also be hosting an array of workshops, high-level round tables and interventions. Artists, designers, creative practitioners and digital art pioneers will bring into context the changing face of these media-friendly mediums and the problems these emerging disciplines are encountering.

The monumental Belgian design studio Lab[au], who we've mentioned here a couple of times before, are holding a conference on "Systems Art,'" a new practice that they feel is emerging from the collision of disciplines and mediums we are experiencing today. The Belgians, masters of combining art, technology and science, lay claim to System Art's beginnings, working from inside and, at the intersection of, the various systems emerging: namely generative, reactive, performative, interactive and connective. Through a panoramic look at the evolution of art, design and architecture over the course of the last century, Lab[au] will attempt to explain the shift from industrial design, which emerged in the early part of the 20th century, to today's "MetaDesign" process (a term of their own devising).

We caught up with Manuel Abendroth, one of Lab[au]'s founders and principal designers to find out more about their unique approach to architecture and design, and to have him explain to us just what, exactly, MetaDesign actually means.

The Creators Project: So how do you pronounce the name of your company and what does it mean?
Manuel Abendroth: It's Lab[au] (*pronounced lab-oh*). It's a short version of the French word for laboratory. You can also pronounce it with the German pronunciation of LaBau (as in Bauhaus), and then it would mean "the construction." So our name is a play on both meanings, indicating that we're a place for production, research, and making constructions.

Tell me a little bit about how you got started.
We are three people in the studio and originally we were all coming from architecture, but the more we get involved with technology, the more we shift away from what we normally would do in architecture. Still, most of our projects are really based on architectural thinking and I would say that many of our installations are dealing with certain layers, or certain information, about the city. Most of the works and installations have a very special background in architecture and we still think that we have something to do with architecture, but in a very broad sense.

We've been working together since 1997, in Brussels, and since 2003 we also have our own gallery space, called MediaRuimte, where we display digital art and experimental art, also seen in a broad range.

So what do you think the relationship between architecture and technology is? I'm sure that it's something that has changed over time.
Yes, in general I would say that architecture has always had a relationship with technology. A very important reference is of course the Bauhaus. There you see how industry relations changed the way of production and changed, on a more basic level, how we think about things, how we see things. They had a huge impact on architecture, but also on art and design. Industrial design came from Bauhaus, for example. And if you look at someone like Le Corbusier and you look at his "poeme electronique" (Philips Pavilion, 1958), where he and Xenakis shaped an entire pavilion to resemble sound waves. Of course it is very technologically minded and changed a lot about how people think about a building. So I think it's not something that is completely new. Of course, the more we have technological acceleration, the more these things get in the mix.

The reason that I bring it up is because of something in your bio, where you say technology is "transforming architecture and temporal structures." I was hoping you could explain what that means?
Maybe I can give an example. If you look at something like the *Binary Waves* installation, an installation of 40 panels constituting a kinetic light wall extending in an urban space where we measure all the urban flow and the surroundings. The information is used to drive the kinetic behavior of the installation and the light display. As such, the installation is transcribing urban flow, but of course urban flow is not only cars and buses nowadays, it is all electrical communication. So the question then would be, "How are we going to take all this data, all these flows which are now in the air, and push it back to architecture?" And here, in the *Binary Waves* installation, we use it as a material and visualize it, and suddenly people get the feeling of what it is.

Do you often see our physical environments being altered by data, and how?
It's not even a question of *if* it's transforming, it's transforming already. You have some new networks, people experiencing the city completely differently because they use social networks where they have their specific bars, specific roads, specific meeting points. For example, we had all these rave parties going on in the city and they were completely organized by social networks. It's here and we already know to use them.

Sure, but I guess what I'm wondering is if architecture itself will somehow transform to accommodate those behaviors?
Of course. I would say that "digital" is the matter we're working with, but of course we are working with it concretely. Let's take for example the Dexia Tower, the skyscraper which we illuminated. People could interact in real-time with the tower and compose graphic shapes on the building in real-time, then snap a photo and get a postcard of what the building looked like in the urban skyline. What I think is interesting in this process is that you really question what is public space? What is the relationship between the citizens, the building, and the city? Or what are the elements that make public space? In this case, [through the process of interaction] it becomes this huge skyscraper—the second highest skyscraper in Brussels, no comparison to New York, but still, it's quite high. The communication between the person and the building is public, it's visible from all over the city.

I'm really intrigued by this idea of technology redefining public space. What do you mean by that?
The question is what will be public space? For example, let's consider the public library. What is it when the library building doesn't exist anymore because everything is online and it's just a browser on your laptop? When the town hall is gone because it is all digitized and accessible through networks? What actually will still be "public space"? What will make up public space? What is the representation of community? So designs will transform, there will be new building forms coming up. Is it an entire building? Or is it a screen? Or just a process that happens?

Can you explain the idea of MetaDesign to me?
You know when I was talking about the Bauhaus, they came up with the idea of industrial design. So it is clearly a relation to technology—in that instance, it's about how the machine alters the way we think about and produce architecture. You go a little bit further in history and you come to the Ulm School of Design. Those people were thinking not only about the product but also about branding, all about the communication, so what they called it is "communication design." There is a lot of ways the notion of design has evolved throughout the 20th century, mostly through these two schools, so there's already a way to define design, it is of course a very specific way to place your artistic activity in certain discourse, in certain ways of doing.

Now we move on to the notion of "meta." When you open your browser and you open a webpage, you have certain things which are displayed, but you have to define the rules of *how* these things are displayed, and all this is written in the source code—that is the meta information. "Meta data" is information about information. The information gets processed and, in this case, it is displayed on your screen.

So I think what is interesting is that the more we go into systems which design, the more the work of the artist or designer will go into this meta level. We, as designers, actually design the process rather than the final product, and the product is actually the result of the process. So the designer works with the idea of the system, the process, and that is actually where we come to the idea of the meta lab and MetaDesign.

Read more about Lab[au]'s theories on design, art and architecture on their website, and stay tuned for more updates from our upcoming event in Paris.