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Curating Creative Experimentation: the HyperPavilion at the 57th Venice Biennial

Interview with Philippe Riss-Schmidt

Philippe Riss-Schmidt and Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès

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Curating Creative Experimentation: the HyperPavilion at the 57th Venice Biennial

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The interview was conducted via e-mail in November 2017.

Figure 1: *HyperPavilion*, courtesy of Philippe Riss-Schmidt

Photo by Vinciane Lebrun-Verguethen

Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès: You curated the *HyperPavilion* exhibition in this year's Venice Biennial.¹ In what way can it be said that the *HyperPavilion* engages with the idea and the forms of experimentation in the arts?

Philippe Riss-Schmidt: As a curator I seek to explore the ways in which the digital and physical worlds have merged to create an entangled hybrid new reality that encompasses and envelops us globally, therefore it is very difficult for me to imagine curating a prospective exhibition without presenting networked, time-based or generative art pieces... The idea of experience is everywhere at the *HyperPavilion*. The limitation for me is to use technology not as a tool, but for its own purpose. Therefore, to answer your question, I believe the notion of experimentation is systematically underlying the exhibition because it is quite difficult to curate an exhibition that comments on our times, if the exhibition remains static. It is experimental because experimentalism is where the critical edge lies. Since the digital exhibition revolution has now become a fact, an accurate exhibition can only be a transition exhibition, i.e. an exhibition that continues to exist after it is officially closed. However, because the digital revolution started more than twenty years ago and is accelerating, I really don't think we can still equate the use of digital means with experimental art.

Figure 2: *HyperPavilion*, courtesy of Philippe Riss-Schmidt

Photo by Vinciane Lebrun-Verguethen

ALFT: Prior to the opening of the Biennial, an article published on March 27, 2017 in *Artnews online*² announced that the *HyperPavilion* would present “post-humanist art”. How would you define post-humanism?

PRS: In this article written for *Artnews* I meant that we presented at the *HyperPavilion* several pieces that were created by the artists with the help of an AI (Artificial Intelligence). But more importantly, I globally meant that due to the connectivity of exponential network systems, we have witnessed the emergence of the first global civilisation and at a same time of multi-centred civilisation. We are at an impending post-human civilisation turn: the infiltration of the network is ubiquitous, the merging of the physical and digital has created a continuous vibration, everything is linked by direct or distended contact, everything is connected, everything is entangled, everything is bathed in the same environment that unfolds in successive encapsulations, which are both visible and invisible. Maybe I should have said post-biohuman rather than post-human because machines have not won yet.

ALFT: Did you conceive of, and experience, the curation of *HyperPavilion* as a moment and as a gesture of creation?

PRS: The exhibition was quite immersive, the idea was for the visitors to experience what was exhibited in a new way — the exhibition included a 360° theatre, very large-scale projections, a hologram theatre... There was indeed a curatorial decision to conceive the exhibition as a moment of immersion and therefore of creative experimentation.

Figure 3: *HyperPavilion*, courtesy of Philippe Riss-Schmidt

Photo by Vinciane Lebrun-Verguethen

ALFT: Most, if not all of the works exhibited at the *HyperPavilion* are site specific. How did you select the artists? Which criteria were applied to the selection?

PRS: I have been following the research of these artists for a while now, I did select a mix of native artists (raised on the internet) and non-native artists (born before the internet). I have been lucky enough to work with a producer willing to produce several new art pieces but we also worked with existing pieces that we did adapt to the venue. It was essential to work with native artists because of the way they think and work: native artists belong to the first generation whose brains have acquired plasticity, who have been changed over time by the internet and the new technologies. The next step would be to work on an exhibition with post-native artists, that is to say the GEN Z.³

ALFT: Did you intervene in the creation of the works? Were they the product of a form of artistic dialogue?

PRS: Yes, a lot. Curating, in my opinion, must be understood as a methodology. Curators must not limit their roles to just researching artists and their works, but expand their roles. They must discern in which direction humanity is going, now that we are all connected... I always worked like that, more particularly when a new piece is commissioned that is very exciting to tackle with the artist.

ALFT: How would you describe the public targeted by the Venice Biennial? Is the public visiting the *HyperPavilion* different from it?

PRS: Being at the Biennale, we targeted both the art world and the newcomers. We had more than 50,000 visitors, it was interesting to see the reaction of native and non-native visitors. While native visitors felt immediately at home, you could see the traditional (non-native) visitors struggle somewhat at the beginning, but on leaving the venue, I believe everyone had learned something.

ALFT: Would you say that post-humanist art is accessible to a wider public than art whose focus and/or medium is not digital?

PRS: Thanks to the expanding networks and the many different means of dissemination nowadays, it is obviously easier to disseminate art and reach out to people, but I would not state that art is accessible to a wider public... yet.

ALFT: Immersion as a medium and a new form of exhibiting art is of paramount importance in the *HyperPavilion*. In what way would you say that digital immersion changes the public's way of apprehending art works?

PRS: We live in a post-“white cube”⁴ era, physical space is no longer the final destination of an exhibition but a part of the exhibition itself. In the 21st century, if you want to comment on the world we live in, the exhibition needs to be built as a transition show that is at the same time physically immersive and that also continues evolving during and after the show.

ALFT: The works presented at *HyperPavilion* all used and questioned technology. Were they also critical vis-à-vis their uses and abuses?

PRS: Actually, the entire exhibition is very critical of new technology, if not dystopian. The first *HyperPavilion* was a survey exhibition at large. Being in the Venice Biennial for the first time, it was important for me to propose a general statement. *HyperPavilion* did focus on an international group of artists, whose common objectives question, challenge and respond to the digital transition. Now that the digital revolution has happened, and that everything from climate to technology is changing at an accelerating pace, I will say humanity has entered phase two of the Anthropocene,⁵ and it does not look good.

ALFT: You used the word “e-renaissance” in connection with *HyperPavilion*. What did you mean?

PRS: It was a euphemism, I meant exactly the contrary actually. I believe we are entering again into dark times not to say the *e*-Middle Ages. We live in “filter bubble”⁶ times where algorithms designed by the very few regulate and monitor the lives of millions of humans, and in the end this risks isolating people within their own bubbles of interest. The world belongs to the lords of GAFA⁷ in the western world or to the kings of BATX⁸ in Asia. I don't think we are even close to an *e-res-publica*.

Figure 4: *HyperPavilion*, courtesy of Philippe Riss-Schmidt

Photo by Vinciane Lebrun-Verguethen

NOTES

1. Founded in 1895, La Biennale di Venezia (the Venice Biennial) is a cultural institution dedicated to the organization of international, multi-disciplinary exhibitions and events foregrounding avant-garde creation in the visual arts (International Art Exhibition), film (International Film Festival), architecture (contemporary music and theatre, contemporary dance). The 57th Biennial during which the *HyperPavilion* was presented opened on May 13, 2017 and closed on November 26, 2017. See the Biennale di Venezia official website (<http://www.labiennale.org>) and the Biennial Foundation website (<http://www.biennialfoundation.org>).
2. Alex Greenberger, “‘Welcome to the E-Renaissance’: ‘HyperPavilion’ Will Showcase Post-Humanist Art During Venice Biennale”, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/03/27/hyperpavilion-venice-biennale/>
3. “Generation Z”, also called “iGeneration”, designates the generation of individuals born around and after the millennium. They are characterised by their familiarity with the internet technology and the digital environment in general. Generation Z follows Generation X (mid 1960s-mid 1970s, the children of the baby boomers) and Generation Y (those born between the 1980s and 2000), in a classification system that was originally designed by demographers and sociologists using the United States’ demographic history as a reference.
4. This phrase is used to refer to the art gallery, especially conceived as a relational space between the viewers and the exhibited works, as it was argued by art critic Brian O’Doherty in his seminal book, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1976).

5. The term has been used informally since the mid 1970s and popularised in 2000 to refer to the radical changes brought to the earth's ecosystems as a result of human activity. Modelled on the designation of geological epochs, the word "*anthropocene*" is derived from the Greek words *anthropos* ("human"), and *kainos* ("new", "recent"). The curatorial statement presenting the *HyperPavilion* provides the following comment: "*Anthropocene* is a term that etymologically translates as new human. An epoch, which specifically focuses on human's impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems. Humanity has entered phase two of the *Anthropocene*, due to the connectivity of its network system, it has formed both a global and multi-centred civilisation. Additionally, the exhibition makes reference to the Gaïa hypothesis, which depicts our Earth as an intelligent, networked and self-regulated system." See the *HyperPavilion* website: <http://hyperpavilion2017.com/#> (accessed January 5, 2018).

6. Coined by American internet activist Eli Pariser, the expression refers to the risk of cultural and ideological isolation because website algorithms select the type of information that users would like to read based on their personalised previous searches, resulting in a considerable narrowing of the exposure to contrary or alternative information.

7. GAFA is an acronym for Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon.

8. BATX is an acronym for the rival companies of GAFA in Asia: Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi.

ABSTRACTS

The interview tackles the issue of the relations between art and technology, curation and creation in the digital age. Philippe Riss-Schmidt, the curator of the *HyperPavilion* presented in the 57th Venice Biennial in 2017, comments on the conception of the exhibition as an experimental immersive space designed to reflect on the post-biohuman world we are entering, and to offer a critical perspective on how artists confront and challenge the digital revolution.

L'entretien aborde la question des rapports entre l'art et la technologie, entre l'activité de commissariat d'expositions et la création artistique à l'ère digitale. Philippe Riss-Schmidt, le commissaire de *HyperPavilion*, exposition présentée à la 57^e Biennale de Venise en 2017, évoque sa conception de l'exposition comme un lieu expérimental et immersif conçu à la fois pour refléter le monde post-humain dans lequel nous entrons et pour proposer un point de vue critique sur la manière dont les artistes s'emparent de la révolution digitale pour mieux la défier.

INDEX

Keywords: contemporary art, experimental, digital exhibition, curation, post-human art

Mots-clés: art contemporain, expérimental, exposition numérique, commissariat d'exposition, art posthumain

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