

## Adventures in the Digital City: Montreal on the Cusp

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A nighttime photograph of a city street. On the left, a building's facade is covered in a grid of bright blue digital lights. In the center, a large, dark tree stands against the night sky. To the right, a multi-story building with lit windows is visible, and a street lamp with two glowing lanterns stands in the foreground. The title text is overlaid in the center-right area.

# Adventures in the Digital City: Montreal on the Cusp









*Cité Mémoire*, tableau created by Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon in collaboration with Michel Marc Bouchard, 2017.  
Projection on a tree. Photo: Jean-François Gratton/ShootStudio.ca.

**M**ontreal has established itself as an international locus of advanced digital art with almost 2000 practitioners who now call it home, including a number of recognized innovators in the field. Maverick Mexican-Canadian interactive artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is foremost among them. He uses cybernetics, electronic surveillance and sundry telematic networks, facial recognition algorithms and 3-D-printed speech bubbles to interrogate issues of identity, freedom and coercion.

Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Room*, created in 2006, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2007, and installed at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 2014, was a proverbial touchstone of interactive art. Computers captured and channelled the heart rate of visitors into pulses of light in some 300 light bulbs suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition room. The surveilled beating of a single human heart was added to that of thousands of others to produce cascading rhapsodic epiphanies.

In a recent interview with Michael-Oliver Harding, Lozano-Hemmer, who oversees a studio with ten people working on his projects in Montreal, speaks out critically. Disappointed that Montreal has not carried through on the radical promise embedded in and prophesied by "Man and His World" in 1967, but he recognizes that the artistic talent is here, as well as the supportive matrices necessary for its cultivation and expression, citing organizations like MUTEK, Elektra, Phi Centre and Arsenal. Lozano-Hemmer suggests that it is only a matter of time before Montreal takes its rightful place as a genuinely experimental, cutting-edge, "risky" city.<sup>1</sup>

Recent evidence gathered from the following installations and interventions, among many others, demonstrate that Montreal is a seedbed on the cusp of wholesale digitalization.

One such intervention is the Jacques Cartier bridge illumination, *Living Connections*, which launched in May of 2017. The Jacques Cartier Bridge has been an icon of the Greater Montreal area since its inauguration in 1930.

*Living Connections* is a *tour de force* of interactive lighting, whereby the bridge is brought to life every night through intelligent programming relying on 10.4 kilometres of cabling, 2807 lights and 10 000 mounting systems. The lights change according to the cycle of the seasons—green to orange to red and, finally, blue; the energetic forces that characterize the Montreal community will be perceivable through the continual flickering of the lights. Their acceleration, intensity, and dimensionality are contingent on the references to Montreal on various social media platforms. Thus, the bridge will embody the city's social conversations in a real-time context. Every hour at night, short 5-minute animations will visually translate Montreal's prevailing mood, inferred from various types of daily data, including the weather, traffic, news, major events, and so on.

Continuously activated by tens of millions of natural and human connections that constitute the living pulse of the city, the bridge itself will effectively mirror Montreal's collective energy and become a living symbol of the city's morphologies and a unifying matrix of its myriad energies.

The concept was conceived by Moment Factory in collaboration with six Montreal multimedia and lighting studios: Ambiances Design Productions, ATOMIC3, Éclairage Public/Ombres, Lucion Média, Réalisations, and UDO Design.

*Aurores Montréal* on the east slope of Mount Royal, in front of Jeanne-Mance Park, memorably celebrated the 375th anniversary of the city from December 11, 2016 until January 1, 2017. In this remarkable light installation by local artist Marc Séguin, in collaboration with the multimedia company 4U2C, the mountain hosted projections covering an area of more than 15 000 square meters. These huge floating, frescoes, as well as the poetry of Marie Uguay and Leonard Cohen, saw the mountain transformed into a living, heraldic icon of the city, like the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles.

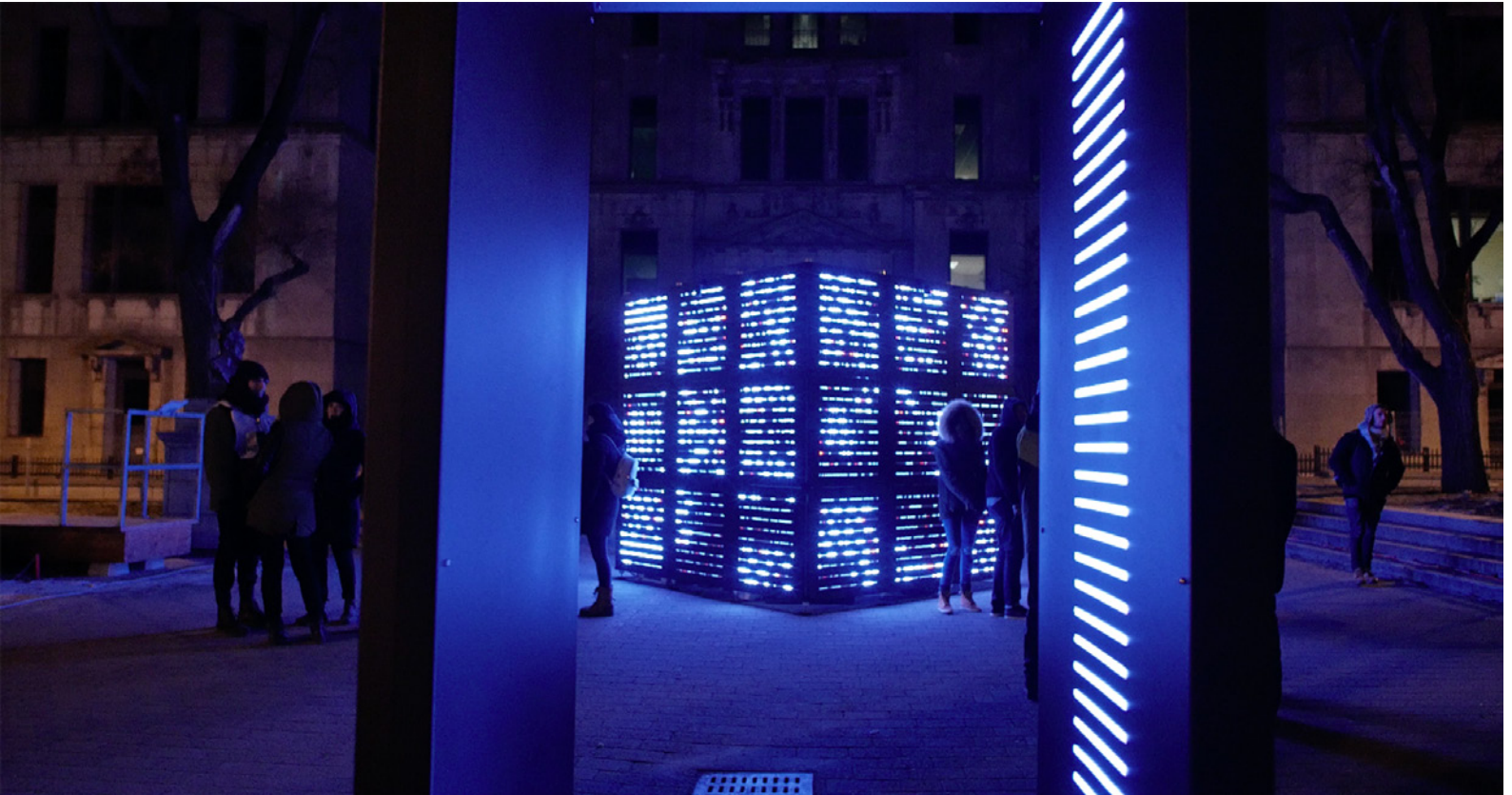
In *Cité Mémoire*, an urban, multimedia experience created by Michel Lemieux





*Cité Mémoire*, tableau created by Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon en collaboration with Michel Marc Bouchard, 2017. Photo: Jean-François Lemire/ShootStudio.ca.





and Victor Pilon in collaboration with Michel Marc Bouchard, various tableaux covering a range of milestones in Montreal's history are projected on the walls of the city. The engaged spectator who follows the "cast" is also drawn into the prevailing spirit of the city through words, images, and music, from its founding through contemporaneity.

A noted creator, set designer, director, composer, performer, and videographer, Lemieux has been at the forefront of the performing arts for almost forty years. Together with his partner Victor Pilon, a director, set designer, visual designer, and photographer, and through their production company Lemieux Pilon 4D Art, they utilize new technologies to intensify the auratic effect of their *tableaux vivants* and enhance their audience's sensory and emotional responses. With the collaboration of noted dramatist Michel Marc Bouchard, who has written more than 25 plays, they essayed a work of meta-theatre, projected throughout Old Montreal every evening from twilight to midnight. Of special interest here are the Illuminart projects (download the app from the Apple Store and Google Play). As part of this year's Montréal en Lumière Festival, Illuminart featured 25 outdoor artworks involving lights and projections. Through video mapping on buildings, interactive installations, and

illuminated sculptures, a welcoming route was opened for promenades through the heart of the city.

One of the local companies involved in Illuminart is 4U2C, mentioned earlier for its work in collaboration with Marc Séguin. The 4U2C team created a dynamic, animated sequence *Ex Umbra*, projected on the facade of the about-125-year-old Monument-National on Saint Laurent Boulevard, as a loving tribute to the oldest Quebec theatre still in operation. Another 4U2C creation, titled *Carina Nebula*, was on display at Parc Toussaint-Louverture on De Maisonneuve Boulevard. Inspired by the public pianos that can be found and played throughout the city, the piano here was linked to a system by which the hitting of each note created a different lighting effect. Montrealers could concoct their very own light show by playing a keyboard.

In *Evolutions*, Yann Nguema and the musical group EZ3kiel employed the digital arts to deconstruct and reconstruct the Saint James United Church on Saint Catherine Street West in real time, transforming the facade into a restless behemoth that transfixes the viewer's attention. Using the interactive web play of projections and lasers, the very stonework begins to move and shimmy.



Marc Séguin, *Aurores Montréal*, projections on the east slope of Mont-Royal, Montreal. December 11, 2016 to January 11, 2017.

In *Irradiance*, a creation of the Société des Arts Technologiques produced by Illuminart, our metrological imprint was generated by some 15 measuring devices contributing to a huge generative architectural projection on the La Capitale Building at 425 De Maisonneuve Blvd. West.

The multipartite *Instance*, one of several beguiling projects initiated by UQAM graduate students in the BA Communications/Interactive Media program, has components installed at different sites in the downtown core and showcases an artificial intelligence conceived of as having been initialized 375 years ago, and which relentlessly watches over Montreal. Sponge-like, this hypothetical AI absorbs all available data on Montreal and its citizens, and evinces a desire to take control of the city. At 2-22 (2 Sainte Catherine Street East), *Instance* sifts Montreal data and compares it with data from other global cities including Lyon, Berlin, and New York. The Brain of the *Instance* system is located in the middle of Place Pasteur. A cubic server that resembles a huge Rubik's Cube consisting of stacked layers of lights is animated by the continual flow of data generated by the system. This cubic server is, in many respects, the star of the show. At Place Pasteur, a projection on the Saint-Jacques Bell Tower transmits *Instance*'s analyses of its digitization of the building, which the entity has undertaken to better understand its city. One section of the bell tower also displays the accumulation of data on participants identified in the capsule in Place Pasteur. The Saint-Jacques Bell Tower effectively becomes a visualised matrix for the human body, displaying the biometric results of its digitization and analyses. At the Grande Bibliothèque, data is indexed by the AI as it digitizes the building and its users, building up a massive databank, the breadth and contents of which are revealed through graphic representations on the walls of the building. At the Pavilion Judith-Jasmin, incoming data on users from all fronts is interpreted and analyzed for links that shed light

on phenomena influencing life in the city. Videos of passersby captured by surveillance cameras are analyzed and shed light on the limits of control. The sheer ingenuity and staggering breadth of *Instance* leads us to believe that the millennium of the Digital City is close at hand.

For Fall 2017, the Quartier des Spectacles Partnership has announced the first edition of a major public art event in the heart of downtown Montreal as part of its 375th anniversary celebrations. Some twenty temporary works and installations, as well as permanent public artworks, will be included in the event called KM3. Works that make dynamic use of the Quartier's digital infrastructure will be a thematic highlight of the event. The curators and scenic artists for this inaugural edition are Melissa Mongiat and Mouna Andraos, the co-founders of the Daily tous les jours design studio and creators of the famous installation *21 Balançoires/21 Swings* and the interactive, multimedia installation *McLarena*. They are also behind *Choreographies for Humans & Stars*, the first digital artwork to be included in the Ville de Montréal's collection of public artworks.

All these recent experiments in and exhibitions of digital and new media artworks bode well for a future that Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, his brave compatriots, and art lovers of all stripes, for that matter, hope will arrive sooner rather than later.

James D. Campbell

**James D. Campbell** is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of several books and catalogues on art and artists and contributes regularly to periodicals, such as *ETC MEDIA*, *Border Crossing*, and *Canadian Art*.

1 Michael-Oliver Harding, "Surveying the New Media Scene with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer" *Phi Centre Blog* (March 29, 2017): <https://phi-centre.com/en/post/en-rafael-lozano-hemmer/>.











Marc Séguin, *Aurores Montréal*, projections on the east slope of Mont-Royal, Montreal. December 11, 2016 to January 11, 2017. 2017.





