



The Art of Technology (and the technology of art)

Interview by
Anna Feigenbaum

There is no Upgrade without a Downgrade

— Upgrade Amsterdam

The Upgrade, an event organized in Montréal by tobias c. van Veen, Sophie Le-Phat Ho and Anik Fournier, is an autonomous, international and grassroots organization of monthly gatherings for digital culture and the technology arts (theupgrade.net or upgrademtl.org). It began in New York City in 1999, organized by Yael Kanarek, with a regular gathering of new media artists and curators who were interested in discussing the technical, aesthetic and political dimensions of their emerging practices. In 2003, Vancouver became the first international node, with Montréal joining shortly after in 2004, followed by over a dozen more global nodes in 2005.

While the basic mandate of “an international, emerging network of autonomous nodes united by art, technology and a commitment to bridging cultural divides” is shared by nodes worldwide, each Upgrade takes on its own character, largely defined by the political and social contexts of their host cities. For example, the New York Upgrade is housed at Eyebeam, an atelier space in Chelsea funded in part by private endowment. This gives the New York node a greater sense of stability and resources for administration and technical equipment than many Upgrades. A very different political economic situation (and much warmer climate) in Salvador, Brazil gives way to their mainly public and open-air events. In the past, members of

Upgrade Salvador have set up Linux-based stations in the *favelas*, attempting to bridge the “digital divide” while teaching programming skills in open source software and offering Internet access. Likewise, the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem Upgrades are shaped by their proximity to the political conflicts in the region, addressing the occupation of Palestine and interrogating the ties between technology and warfare.

Over the past two years, Upgrade Montréal has organized diverse events that aim to bridge digital culture and the technology arts while providing a forum for feedback and discussion. Events such as an eclectic cabaret and art auction for Critical Art Ensemble (September 05) to a subzero, winter street celebration of Art’s Birthday (January 06) sought to connect various technology practitioners, artists and theorists across disciplines and divides.¹

In 2006, Upgrade Montréal organized several major events including an International Women’s Day showcase “remixing” the voices of Aboriginal women that engaged technology as a point of access to address issues of violence against native women in Canada (March) and the first North American gathering of the net-criticism project Nettime.org (June) under the umbrella of the MUTEK festival for digital culture.² This event connected theory, art, music and activism through panels and perform-



Phantom Technology, Upgrade, May 2006.
Photo: Tanya Goehring.



Andrew Brouse and crew, Upgrade, February 2006. Photo: tobias c. van Veen.

ances that interrogated strategies of engagement with media and technology. Smaller events have included a panel on tactical media practices (April) and a showcase of the digital techniques of contemporary choreographers (July). Upgrade events cross borders between disciplines and challenge the division between artistic practice and political activism that often segregates both organizers and audiences in Montréal.

I recently sat down to talk with the organizers of Upgrade Montréal about their efforts to present and critically engage the technology arts. Below I reweave our conversation to reveal the singularity, as well as the interdependency, of each issue.

thread one: techne

techne/teck-nay/noun 1 The set of principles, or rational method, involved in the production of an object or the accomplishment of an end; the knowledge of such principles or method.

ANNA FEIGENBAUM: How do you define and conceptualize what digital culture and technology art are?

TOBIAS C VAN VEEN: The funny thing about “digital culture” is that it seems to be a term that is primarily Francophone. In English, “digital culture” seems to be opposed to analogue culture, whereas “technology arts” is the term I prefer and the one that is in our definition of the Upgrade. Both MUTEK and SAT will use the term “*culture numérique*.” I think it’s misleading because most art practices that incorporate technology in an explicit or even implicit way don’t necessarily focus upon digital means to do so. Turntablism and video art would be excluded in that definition. So the “digital culture” term is one of those buzzwords that seems to mean something like “new media” but is completely amorphous as it recycles itself.

ANNA: How specifically about technology are the events you organize?

ANIK FOURNIER: It’s something that we don’t talk explicitly about when we’re in

meetings. We are more interested in an artist’s ideas. What they are doing with the technology. For instance Freda Guttman doesn’t really do much with recent technologies.³ When she presented at the Upgrade in November she did a slide presentation. But we are interested in the issues she is concerned with such as how she addresses technology through the technology of memory, and the way that she uses video technologies even if they’re not the most elaborate ones. I think it’s almost pointless to define technology art. Where do you draw the line? *Techne* can be things made with your hands: tools, objects. When does it become technology? When does it become new media? All of these terms are vague.

TOBIAS: New media always seems to constitute trends: what consumer technology can someone get their hands on and start playing with? A lot of that work can be extremely formalistic, sort of self-reflective upon the medium itself. Or it can be very political, like some net.art, when it reflects upon problematic access to the medium, or issues of control, such as military devel-

them up at the same time with an international sense of how it operates worldwide. The hacker aesthetic, in the broadest sense of questioning and exploring structures of power and technology, hasn't broadly resonated with Québécois practices.

thread three: space

space/spays/ noun 1 the three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction.

ANNA: When I was at Hexagram⁴ for the *Tactical Media Upgrade* with a friend of mine who works for Haiti Action Montréal we realized how much money has gone into the amazing equipment they have, but that it's a very closed-off space. And we were joking, "Wow what could one of our activist organizations do with, say, one of these computers?"

SOPHIE: It was apparently the first time that an external body came into that space. And we were lucky because the technician that was responsible, who's also an artist and into the stuff we are into, was like, "Yeah, come and use this fucking equipment!"⁵

TOBIAS: Hexagram is a very different space than SAT. With SAT, I can say all the equipment they have they use and then they duct tape it back together again. But SAT, like Hexagram, exhibits tendencies to close itself off in other ways. While it remains an admirable space where almost anyone can walk in, with all this chaotic energy in every direction it makes it difficult to coordinate an event. And raising political questions within the context of technology art sometimes catches institutions off-guard.



Critical Practice Resuscitation Flyer, May 2006. Design: Kevin Yuen Kit Lo.

SOPHIE: The neat thing is that, although we are a group that can't afford to rent SAT — like so many others — we get to present work by other groups that couldn't afford it either. That is also why we are into collaborations, as a way of intervening in the normal economics of media arts dissemination.

TOBIAS: I think we've had a huge impact on the perception of SAT. Whether this has changed the nature of the organization or prompted a thinking of the political in their activities and structure remains to be seen. One hopes that the combination of outside expectations based on Upgrade events and the communication of parasitical techniques to inhabit such spaces will only lead such institutions to open their doors (and minds) more often — whether that door is sprung from the inside or deftly picked from the outside.

thread four: resources

resource/ri'zaws/ noun 1 (usu in pl) an available means of help, support, or provision. 2 (usu. in pl) the ability to deal with a difficult situation; resourcefulness.

ANNA: There are a limited number of ways in which one can come up with material resources. And something like the Upgrade is not a money-making body, it's not incorporated, so what do you do about applying for grants?



Anik Fournier, tobias c. van Veen, Sophie Le-Phat Ho, June 2006. Photo: the Monkeys.

TOBIAS: Grassroots collectives don't easily fall into the current funding scheme. What we really need are funds to give to artists so they can come here and we can pay them! And what people need is cash to buy equipment. The technology required is not that much more expensive than what a painter requires for a canvas, yet the means to self-produce events is something the Canada Council is reluctant to give grants for. If we had portable equipment then we wouldn't need to depend upon institutions to give us *gratis* what we need to produce each event. There is a question here with Canada Council funding equipment in general and specifically with the media arts.

thread five: futurity

futurity/fyooh'tyoo?riti/ 1 the future. 2 a future event or prospect.

ANNA: What do you see in the Upgrade's future?

TOBIAS: We need to find ways to not become burnt out on the institutional problems. In the technology arts there is a lack, sometimes, of the critical edge. Much contemporary artistic investigation of technology is often closely entrapped in relations to corporate technologies, such as the field of locative media. Many artists further the goals of advertising *even when* considering the interventionist possibilities of this complex media. Critique obviously isn't enough: we need different kinds of institutions. The "net criticism" pioneered by writers, artists and activists associated with Nettime.org and the guerrilla approaches of tactical media and hacktivism offer crafty viral tactics for the infiltration of institutions.

But today both the institution and its critique are caught in a precarious web of

complexity. We are operating in a globalized, network field of intercommunications, relying upon the balance of social networking (and rarely funding). We are of the "and...and...and..." generation: curators/artists/turntablists/graduate students/baristas/writers... Viva *San Precario!*⁷

We're running without a budget so it has to be fun both for us and the audience. Maybe instead of trying to produce a *spectacle*, an event, we should be throwing up guerrilla projections or having snowball fights coordinated through transistor radios. Something wild and silly. We have to learn from the periphery. One feels that the "core" can't innovate anymore, it has to come from elsewhere. I'd like to learn from Upgrade Salvador (Brazil) and others, where the grasp of technology marks a different context, timeframe and scale. I think for us to be attentive to the political dimension and our own place in this sphere will turn Upgrade Montréal from simply being this interesting grassroots exchange of technology artists into something *other* — imagine a viral node caught in the unstoppable swarming of the institutions.

Anna Feigenbaum is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies at McGill University in Montréal where she enjoys various modes of collective troublemaking. Recently she organized the "If I Can't Dance Anarchist Cabaret" which opened Montréal's 2006 Anarchist book fair.

Notes:

1. From the 2006 "Upgrade Montréal" report on activities.
2. See <http://upgrademtl.org/cnr> and for MUTEK see <http://mutek.ca>
3. See <http://www.victoriaartssymposium.com/fredaguttman.php>
4. The intra-university multi-million dollar project Hexagram, the "Institution for Research/Creation in Media Arts and Technologies." See <http://hexagram.org>
5. Sophie writes: "Obviously he didn't say that exactly, but that is the spirit we understood it to be in."
6. Oboro. Centre dedicated to production and presentation of art, contemporary practices and new media <http://oboro.net>; La Centrale. La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse a pour but et comme politique générale de donner une voix à la diversité du travail en art actuel des femmes <http://lacentrale.org>
7. See Marcello Tari and Ilaria Vanni, "On the Life and Deeds of San Precario. Patron Saint of Precarious Workers and Lives," *Fibreculture* 5: http://journal.fibreculture.org/issue5/vanni_tari.html