

10

TECHNOCITÉ,
2004-2014
10 DIGITAL YEARS
IN MONS

D/Y

/M

TO BE WHERE THE PIXELS ARE
CONVERSATION WITH ERIC JORIS

CREW, U © Eric Joris/CREW
CREW was often supported by TechnocITé, especially during VIA.PRO encounters



Crossroad n. 2, CECN 2012 © Eric Joris/CREW

/ ITW: ERIC JORIS

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF CREW
INTERVIEW BY JACQUES URBANSKA

/TO BE WHERE THE PIXELS ARE

Unlike theatrical screens, the 'stage-image' is the transposition of the stage itself into images. Without an identifiable screen¹, the proposition becomes an immersion in 3D imagery, associated with interactive technologies that enable the adaptation of the visual by either real-time or deferred-time modification. In the stage-image, the mediated visual becomes a space that is habitable, sensory, interactive and modifiable at will².

Led by artist Eric Joris, the Belgian collective CREW³ explore very specific immersions which seek to elaborate, define and theorise a new artistic medium. Unlike other research in the same area, CREW's immersive, artefactual sensorial experiments have always favoured the diffusion of video images filmed and not virtually assembled from all sides. This introduces the public to worlds close to their reality, which can therefore be more easily merged, substituted or superimposed upon it. The mixture of video recordings, live versus pre-recorded, creates obscure zones, the loss of reference points - which can be minimal - but which generate unfamiliar mental and physical sensations.

01 // Via immersive interfaces: virtual reality headsets, audio headphones, multi-directional cameras.

02 // Clarisse Bardiot, "Arts de la scène et technologies numériques: les digital performances" - Collection 'Les Basiques, Leonardo/ Olats, 2013. Collection managed by Annick Bureau

03 // crewonline.org

04 // "L'Alphabédaire" (The Alphabet Primer) by Gilles Deleuze - produced by Pierre-André Boutang - 1988

If philosophers create *concepts*, then artists work with *percepts*, defined as: "an amalgam of perceptions and sensations which exist for those who experience them"⁴ and which create a lasting impression on our way of perceiving and viewing the world. What interests Eric Joris is not so much what we do with technology, as the effect technology has on us: "We try to create technological conditions in which we can be fully immersed, which detach us from a certain reality with which we are familiar. We then observe the effects that this produces, which is the primary content of our productions. It is not merely a case of intellectual reactions, they can be very physical and very strong: during our first productions a lot of people felt unwell and one in ten literally fainted during the performance. We had to adjust the settings and find ways of transforming the research into reproducible experiments in order to be able to (re)introduce it to the public." Over a period of fifteen years the collective has produced around thirty projects, from installations to theatrical productions.

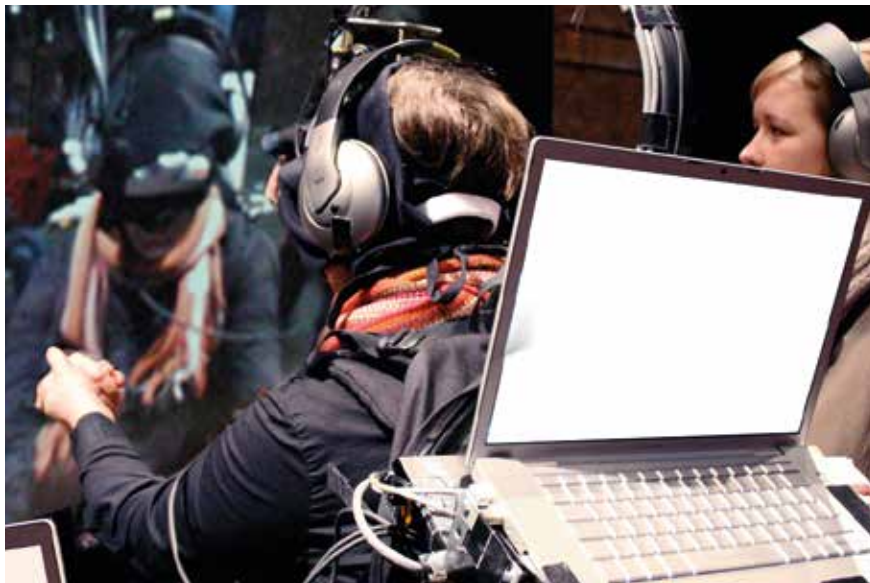
What difficulties have to be faced when presenting work as specific and innovatory as CREW's?

Eric Joris: A large part of our work is research and experimentation - I even prefer to refer to it as trials - not only in terms of the projects' conception, but also in terms of the productions that we give and which the public must experience for themselves. Even if we have been talking for a long time now about cross-disciplinary work, intermedia, digital art, interactive installations... it still remains difficult, the audience has very little involvement. Some people turn up with the pre-defined role of spectator (or perhaps spect-actor); others come with expectations or want immediacy in the production, they want to understand without explanation; or, when they see the cameras, imagine a kind of cinema or theatre in which a story will unfold... Sometimes this causes misunderstandings and disappointment. When we started, this artistic medium didn't exist as such, even today it's taking its first steps, it's starting to take shape. It is neither cinema nor theatre or performance, nor is it visual or interactive art, or what is frequently called virtual or increased reality... although it borrows, here

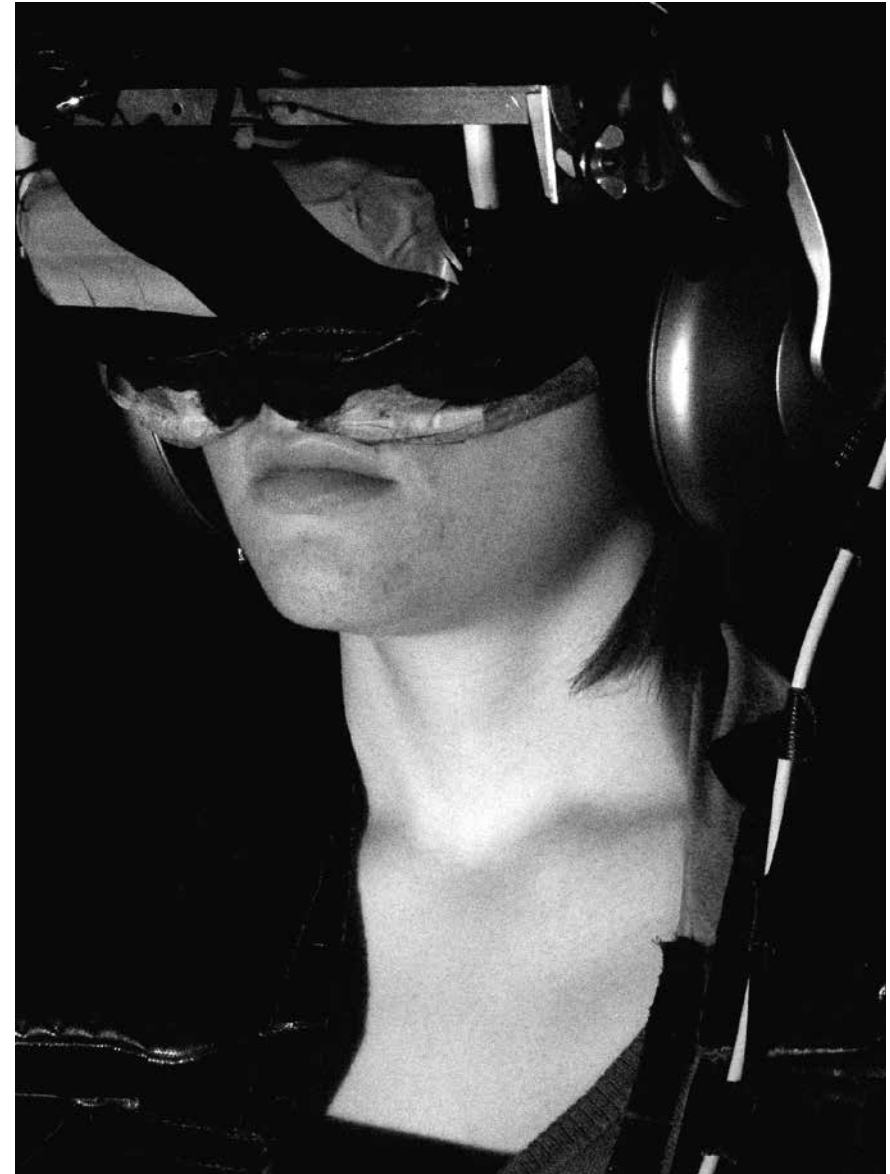
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CREW, *Terra Nova*, 2012 © Eric Joris/CREW



CREW, *Headswap*, Mons, 2009 © Stéphane Lintermans



CREW, *U* © Eric Joris/CREW

/ WHEN WE STARTED, THIS ARTISTIC MEDIUM DIDN'T EXIST AS SUCH, EVEN TODAY IT'S TAKING ITS FIRST STEPS, IT'S STARTING TO TAKE SHAPE. /

and there, from all these media... It introduces another way for the public to perceive themselves, to dialogue with the object. And sometimes the dialogue can fail to start. That is a risk that we have learned to assimilate into the creation of our projects. As is the case with failure, which we don't fear: setbacks are part of the process.

You told me in the early years that some people didn't understand the point of the exercise: asking them to go to the first floor of the building where they were, then to the second floor, then have them come back, invite them to walk in the street etc, to then come back into the theatre...they simply hadn't realised that they had only walked within a circle that was five metres in diameter, and had never left the building where they were.

Yes [laughter], today the project (and the technologies that it uses) has started to be better known by the general public, but ten years ago it seemed quite magical: we could easily create a kind of *virtual reality* in which the public very naturally believed because they simply weren't expecting it at all. It was a first, exciting stage in our work, even if we very quickly realised that, over and above the subterfuge and the technological prowess, it wasn't very interesting in itself. We therefore completely changed direction: we worked on slow movement, on simple gestures/actions and on the awareness that what we see isn't real (or is situated in another reality). For example the person sees his legs, but is aware that it is only an image that he is seeing. At the same time, he is fully aware that his physical legs are in the same place, making the same movements. What interests us today is what are called *transitional zones*, the point where the two *realities* collide, where there is overlap. It's very interesting to see what happens in the brain at that moment.

The technological and theatrical drama context that you set up doesn't create the production... nor the medium, since it still awaits the public experience, their nervous systems, brains and personal ways of perceiving and reacting?

What it does create is the context in which the medium can be birthed. And of course, the audience have to do their part, which is to experience: it's more than a simple interaction. If they expect things to happen to them just like that, nothing will, because they won't feel anything. They have to dialogue with the medium, test it, be open to their own sensations. What's more, in our productions, we have abandoned the concepts of spectator/spect-actor in favour of the role of 'engager', which has the advantage of being less familiar, but inviting active participation.

If we take the example of *U*, we wanted to explore the mental processes of patients suffering from Alzheimer's. Most people consider technology as a means of *progression*. We wanted to explore it as a means of *regression*, we wanted the 'engagers' to be able to feel this. To be able to 'real-feel' this disease rather than merely explain it. A human being isn't in direct contact with *reality*, since our brain functions with models of mental stimulation that are interpreted via our senses. If there is a slight modification in one of the parameters within this process, it can be very interesting. The realisation that our recollection of facts has been altered, that we are perhaps no longer in possession of all our faculties, is a sensation that is difficult to express in words. We therefore wanted to create a context that would enable the public to have this experience and to become aware, through subterfuge, of a slightly modified reality.

In an interview⁵ held with Franck Bauchard⁶, it is clear that the concepts of textual theatrical scripts and narration are key. Why did you want to reintroduce this theatrical genre into your research?

We have always wanted to explore the *theatrical* possibilities of our productions: to look at how to tell a story via this medium, since immersion is experienced in the first person. To introduce a narrator or narrative systems such as those imported from other media - from the theatre or cinema for example - therefore makes no sense to me. We must reinvent, rethink the text. To be there, *where the pixels are*, is not in order to (re)present something: we immerse ourselves in the subject, we become one with it. Our challenge isn't only technological, if specific theatrical or cinematographic scripts exist, there must also exist a specific script for this new medium, and that is what we are experimenting with.

You took the risk of developing your own technologies, both hardware and software. How does your material compare with commercial products such as Oculus Rift⁷ and in what ways is your research similar or different?

Firstly, when we started out, the existing technology was not only scarce but out of our price-range. We had goals and we simply sought to achieve them with the means at our disposal. We were fortunate to very quickly start working with science labs who accompanied our project in exchange for information. That is still how we work today: it's a win-win situation. They help us create the framework, we experiment with it, we are not there to provide answers, but rather to ask the questions.

Concerning Oculus Rift, it is of course an interesting product. With a modest budget more can be provided for more people. It offers good visual impact for games, but for *filmic* images such as we use that are less uniform, more complex, the pixels are slightly too large and we can't distinguish the details. It works well for close-ups, for wide shots, but not for regular ones, it is a lot less efficient than the system we are developing. It has a good attachment system which is simple to install, there's a small ventilation problem which means that perspiration very quickly becomes an issue. For the moment it's a project that is only just underway, and I can imagine that if it continues to develop then these problems will be corrected and it will become an interesting option. Having said that, when you use high-street products sooner or later you are always limited by something. That is why we have always preferred to develop everything ourselves, even if, of course, that places demands on the budget.

Could you imagine one day using the crowdfunding system for your projects?

Since the next stage of our work involves networking, and therefore multiplying hardware, we will have to develop systems that are lighter, more compact, less complex and less expensive. This could of course be a good way of reaching more people in other contexts. What has been happening over the last few years with crowdfunding is very interesting. It is not only the development of headsets that has caught our attention, the cameras, for example, represent another

essential aspect and there is currently a wealth of new ideas coming onto the market via this channel. It also enables us to connect with the business world, which is a very positive thing.

You have been exploring immersion for fifteen years now, has it become an obsession for you? Do you feel the need to work on something else?

Yes and no, because when you work in emerging fields such as this one, the possibilities are enormous, you can head in any number of directions and it can take you a very long way from your initial research. And we are very enthusiastic about it, so the material we accumulate and the projects we undertake are many and various. Unfortunately we can't tackle everything and for me it's always important to show an end result. But we collaborate with a lot of artists in many domains and not only at a cultural or artistic level.

For example, we are currently in a consortium that comprises a range of artists who are working on postproduction procedures for cinema. Postproduction for a film requires a considerable amount of time, sometimes years, and as it is often a decentralised process, the producer or director can easily lose track. We had the idea of developing technologies so that these production stages could be kept on set, so that it could (almost) be done in real time so that everyone can directly have their say *while* the film is being shot.

For the time being, only a few big-budget productions have access to this kind of technology (and even there it could be taken much further). It has to become more widespread so that more modest projects can also benefit and experiment with it. For example, we are wanting to be able to rework our motion captures in real time. The first test results are quite simply outstanding.

05 // Patch magazine #12 - 2011 - CCDS2, Centre for Contemporary Digital Scripts

06 // Then director of La Chartreuse - C.I.R.C.A - C.N.E.S, today director of La Panacée, Centre de culture contemporaine - Montpellier

07 // Low-cost immersive headset, available on the high street, very much in demand for video games

/ I ESPECIALLY REMEMBER THE
PROFESSIONAL ENCOUNTERS AT
THE VIA FESTIVAL, WHICH WAS
AN EXCEPTIONALLY GOOD
PRESENTATION FORUM. /

08 // Director of
CCDS and TechnocITé

09 // cecn.eu

10 // technocite.be

/ IN BELGIUM WE HAVE OTHER
PARTNERSHIP STRUCTURES
BUT IN MONS THERE IS THIS
TECHNOLOGICAL SPECIFICITY
THAT IS OFTEN
LACKING ELSEWHERE. /

11 // Preliminary
research for the out-
working of the main
theme for Mons 2015:
"Where technology
meets culture". Propos-
al made by CCDS.

12 //
transdigital.org -
see also the series of ar-
ticles published about
CREW in the 'Cook-
book#1' - Transdigital

**You have been several times to Mons in the
context of your projects. What do you recall of
these different collaborations in Mons?**

We have a privileged relationship with Pascal Keiser⁸ and he accompanied us - whether at CCDS⁹ or TechnocITé¹⁰ - in our preparation, demonstration and production. I especially remember the *Professional Encounters* at the VIA Festival, which was an exceptionally good presentation forum. We all work on our own, we are very busy and don't take the time to go see what is happening elsewhere. Space-time venues where professionals can meet, make contact, discuss and exchange are indispensable. In Belgium we have other partnership structures such as Buda in Courtrai or the Kaai in Brussels, but in Mons there is this technological specificity that is often lacking elsewhere. I could quote some other examples: the *O_Rex* project, one of our very complicated productions, would quite simply not have happened without the help of CCDS; workshops and residential training courses including CROSSROAD¹¹, a time for reflection that we don't often take, without the pressure to produce an end result; the participation in the European project Transdigital¹² (proposed by TechnocITé), which aimed to bring together the worlds of research, science, business and the arts. There were also magical moments during presentations, such as *Headswap* by satellite, with one engager in Mons and the other in Barcelona... As we wait for their latest production, CREW continue to work on and present their project C.A.P.E (Cave Automatic Personal Environment), which invites the audience to stroll through virtual environments whose immersive content is enriched year by year.