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Montreal First International Digit Arts Biennial
1e Biennale internationale d'art numérique-BIAN/International Digit Arts Biennial + Elektra 13, Montreal. April 18 - June 13, 2012

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# MONTREAL FIRST INTERNATIONAL DIGIT ARTS BIENNIAL

Montreal is in the process of branding itself as a "festival" city with, for example, the downtown core being transformed into a "Quartier des Spectacles" that increasingly features large venues and public spaces for stage and performing arts. Within this "festival" and performance spirit, a newly minted BIAN: Biennale international d'art numérique has been launched, giving precedence to the "spectacle" of new media arts. The BIAN joins the festival landscape of Montreal that includes many luminary cultural events from the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal, Les FrancoFolies de Montréal, Just for Laughs Festival, to Mutek, and the Festival du nouveau cinéma. However, as a child of the now established and popular audiovisual festival Elektra—recently presenting its thirteenth edition—the BIAN piggybacks on its parent's reputation, networks and expertise, as well as audience to bring a more focused portrait of digital media arts' myriad embodiments. Where Elektra focuses principally on performative digital screens and music—and La Biennale de Montréal on the traditional plastic and visual arts—the BIAN balances out the competition by validating technological and media arts installations and objects.

The BIAN took place in and around Montreal from April 18 to June 13, 2012. Distributed across an array of galleries, museums, artist-run centers and maisons de la culture, the biennale's exhibitions and events spanned a varied repertoire of technologies associated with media arts including: electronics, digital screens, kinetic and robotic sculptures, generative works, sound art, interactive video installations and more. The underlying theme of the BIAN, "Phenomena," suggested sense perception as a starting point for understanding media arts technologies. Within the epistemological framework of scientific enquiry, and according to prominent twentieth century Danish physicist-philosopher Niels Bohr, phenomena—the requisite condition through which we acquire objective knowledge—resides at the complex intersection of our sense perception and the material(ized) object.[1] It was via this theory that Bohr explained how light could be both a particle and a wave, as light could be perceived through different apparatuses and contexts, thus altering its phenomena. We can extrapolate from Bohr's ideas that media arts artefacts—comprised of sound waves, digital screens, radio frequencies, tangible objects and more—are, as phenomena, variable: virtual, subjective, context and tool-specific, as well as inclined to perceptive malleability.

Of the many "phenomenal" works to be experienced during the BIAN, Ryoji Ikeda's retrospective at DHC/ART is one of the highlights. Ikeda, a Japanese-born and Paris-based electronic composer and visual artist—as well as former member of the multimedia group Dumb Type—has developed a uniquely stylized and fine-scaled image and sound data iconography based on mathematical schematics and minimalist graphics. Exploring image and time sequentiality, *Systematics*, presented static celluloid frames, micro film, light boxes, works on paper, and sculptural pieces, inviting the viewer to peer deep into a mathematical array of numerical and visual systems at the twilight of perception. Meanwhile, the dynamic works part of the *Datamatics* series displayed a family of graphical video streams, imaging the extensive and fast-paced datascape, englobing the information flux in which we exist. Also presented by DHC/ART at their new multimedia centre PHI, was the intense Tesla-esque installation by Montrealer Alexandre Burton of the collective Artificiel entitled *Impacts*. Presenting five tesla coil sculptures that the public could activate through the presence of their electrical bodily mass, the work offered a material instantiation of an interactive system that harnessed the energy of its spectators in order to create the visual and auditory phenomena of sparks.

Local kinetic sculptor Peter Flemming's *Instrumentation* exhibition at Centre des Arts Skol displayed a collection of sonic sculptures, incorporating everyday objects such as buckets, piano strings, jars along with mechanical saltwater dimmer, plywood transducers, electromagnetic pickups, stepper motors, light dimmers, electromagnetic coils and custom circuits to investigate natural resonant frequencies. A hybrid between Luigi Rusollo's *Intonarumori* ("Art of Noise") machines and a mad scientist's basement laboratory, Flemming's oeuvre staged aleatory sound experiments, stemming from unexpected
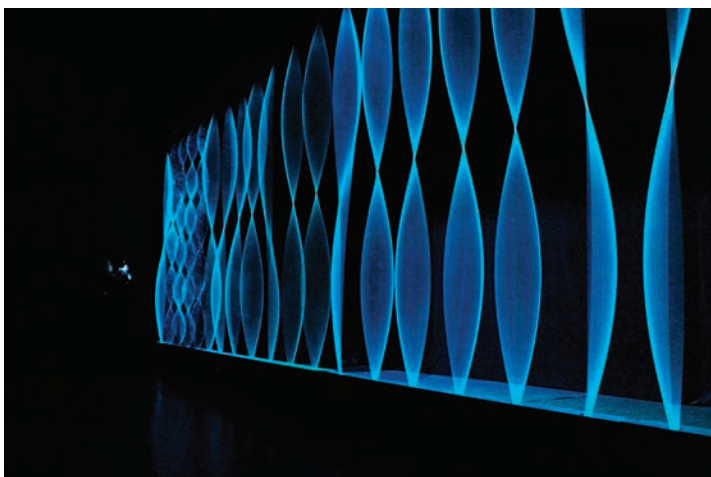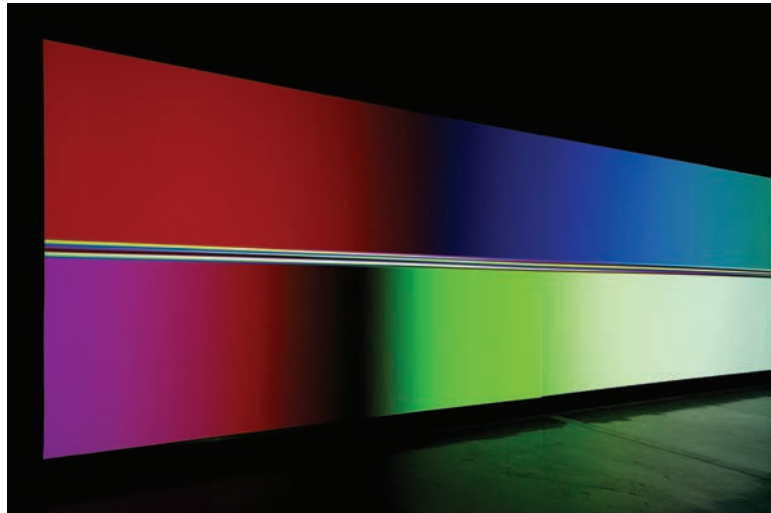
Ryoji Ikeda, *Datatron 2*
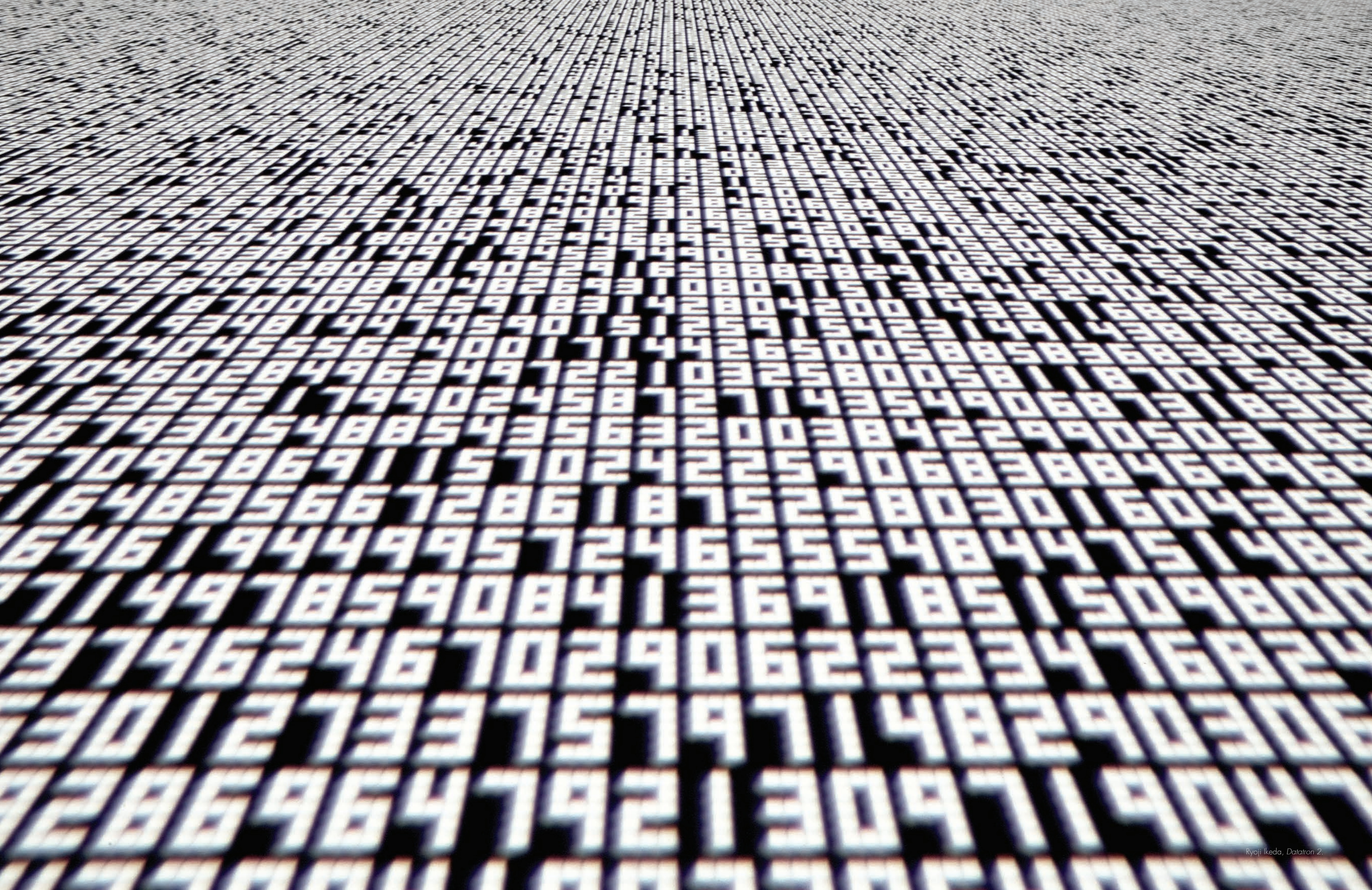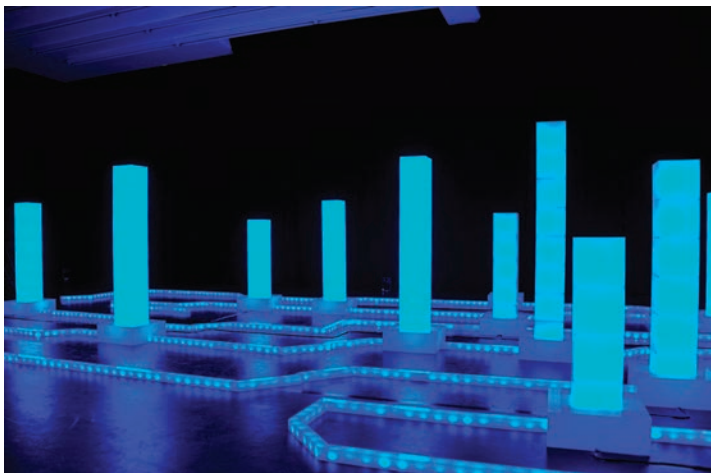
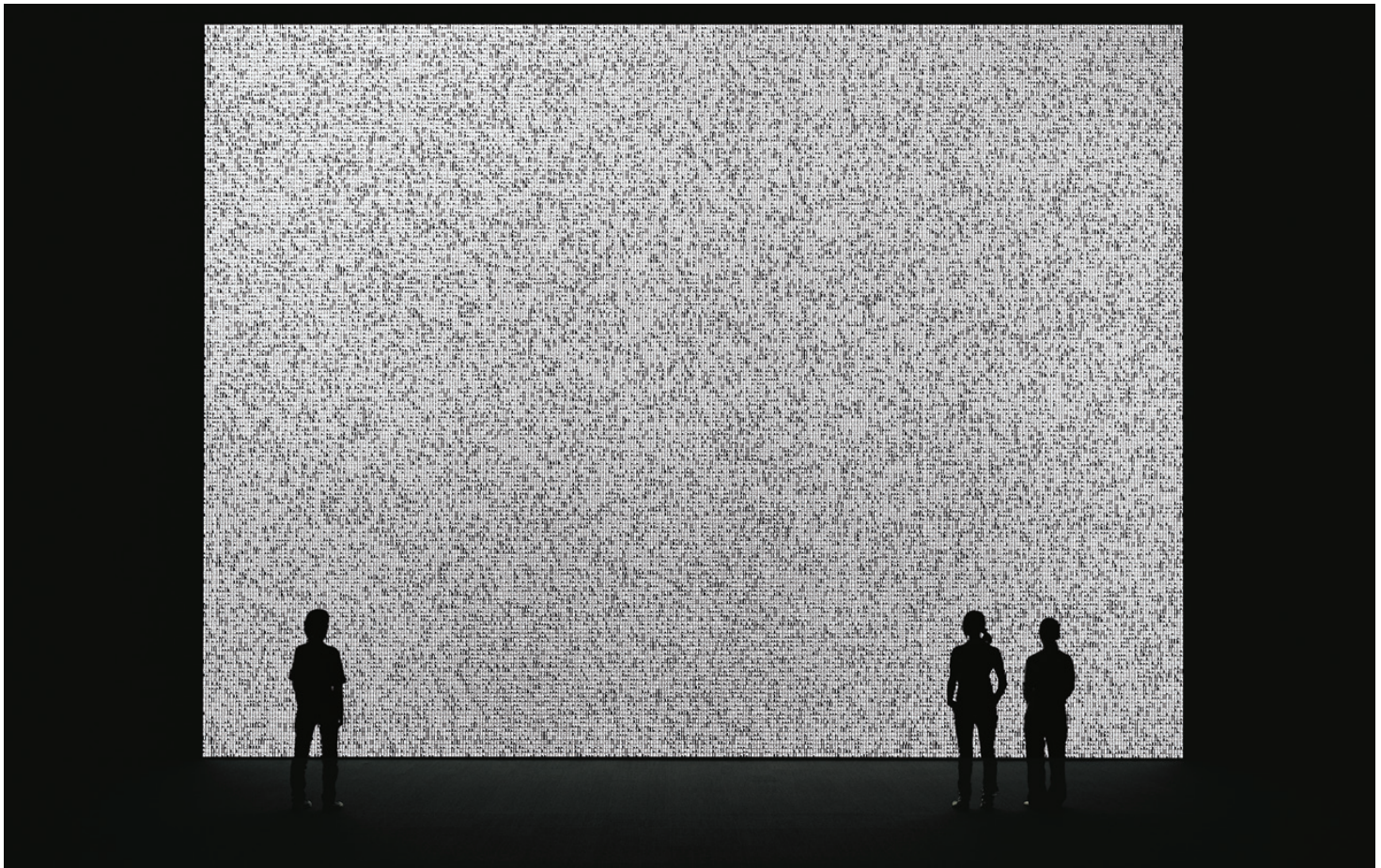*A Digital Experience*. Visual system, crédit, conception.

Alva Noto, *Univers*, Crédit : Dieter_Wuschanski.

Fure et Albert, *Tripwire*. Crédit: conception, photo.

Matthew Biderman, *Event Horizon*, Crédit, conception, photo.

Ryoji Ikeda, *Datatron 1.*

materials, recalling the concrete sound research of composers such as Pierre Schaeffer or John Cage. OBORO's showcasing of Swiss artist Zimoun's *Prepared DC-Motors on Cardboard,* also constructed an indeterminate musical composition by way of kinetically mechanized cork balls, percussively bouncing on the architecturally stacked cardboard boxes that lined the gallery walls. The effect was a simple, yet immersive, mechanical arte povera orchestra.

The *Out of the Blue* Arcadi-funded exhibition of French multimedia artists at the Ancienne École des Beaux-Arts de Montréal had a cohesive repertory of large-scale illuminated, and non-interactive installations, resembling set-design more than media art. Of note was the atmospherically captivating work *Supernova* by Félicie D'Estienne D'Orves, which re-created the lifecycle of the famous star within a small box of "magical" props of light projections and smoke. American composer Ashley Fure and Jean-Michel Albert's *Tripwire,* fabricated of kinetic wires on which were projected optical transformations accompanied by an audio composition, offered an equally theatrical wall of effects.

Literally exploring scientific "phenomena," *Event Horizon* by Matthew Biederman at the Cinémathèque Québécoise, saw the artist probe the threshold of human visual and sound perception via a video installation, featuring subtle and meditative colour transformations. As well, Jean-Pierre Aubé's politico-aesthetic *Electrosmog* installation at the Centre d'art et de diffusion Clark revealed the electromagnetic spectrum of our environment through the use a self-designed radio receiver and computer antenna. With this custom "smog" recorder, Aubé charted the radiation from millions of radio, cellular and electrical devices in various cities around the world (Mumbai, Berlin, Istanbul, Hong Kong, and San Francisco) and overlaid this data onto digital representations (videos, photographs, audio).

There were many more local media artists featured as part of the BIAN, including Robert Lepage, Bill Vorn, Chantal Dupont, Taien Ng-Chan, Pascal Dufaux, Philomène Longpré, Jean Dubois and the collective Perte de Signal. Taking nothing way from the works themselves, it was, however, difficult at times to know if their inclusion stemmed from a desire to gather as many venues as possible within the framework of the BIAN, or if a considered thematic correlating to "phenomena" had been mapped out.

Three exceptional audiovisual performances within BIAN/Elektra also need mention. Carsten Nicolai, the Berlin-based multimedia artist, presenting under his pseudonym alva noto, screened a North American premiere of *Univers (Uniscope Version)* in which he manipulated in real-time a repertoire of ludic yet restrained atomical graphics that included colour bars mixed with popular culture logos. The Japanese-born, Berlin-based, video artist Ryoichi Kurokawa in collaboration with Athens-based sound artist Novi_sad showcased *Sirens,* a touching audiovisual landscape tethered somewhere between visual representation and sublime digital disintegration. Finally, at the new Société des Arts Technologiques' Satosphère—a three dimensional projection cupola—Ulf Langheinrich's immersive audiovisual composition *Hemisphere,* exploring fractal noise algorithms and particle systems, was a nostalgic reminder of his former—and somewhat more evocative—work with Kurt Hentschläger as part of the now defunct German/Austrian duo Granular Synthesis.

As with all first editions, there is room to insert a few course corrections for BIANs to come. To begin with, the umbrella thematic—in this case "phenome-

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na"—could have been further expanded and reflected throughout the bien-nale: conferences, texts, exhibition design, etc., could have aided this. Without a felt curatorial nexus across the dispersed venues and events, the BIAN risks merely functioning as a polar attractor of media works, converging on calen-dar dates, as opposed to fleshing out a considered vision. The BIAN holds a unique opportunity to build on its strength of networking disparate galleries, museums and venues around the presentation of media arts—no small feat in Montreal!—along with its strong public profile, making it poised to influence and shape the media arts outlook of Montreal. With the excitement of this new BIAN, it also remains to be asked: how will the BIAN transform Montreal's media arts landscape? And with this in view, we eagerly await future editions!

Valérie Lamontagne

Valérie Lamontagne is a digital media artist, wearables designer, curator and a PhD candidate researching "Performativity, Materiality and Laboratory Practices in Artistic Wearables".

Note
1 The theories of Niels Bohr are drawn from Karen Barad's essay "Agential Realism: Feminist Interventions in Understan-ding Scientific Practices" in *The Science Studies Reader*, Ed. Mario Biagioli (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

1- 2- 3- 4 Peter Flemming, *Instrumentation*.
Photos: Guy L'Heureux.
5- 6 Zimoun. Crédit : conception, photo.

Sirens Novi Sad et Ryoichi Kurokawa. Crédit : Ryoichi Kurokawa.