

In-site Montréal: Curator's statement

By: Michelle Kasprzak

In-Site Montréal is a collection of site-specific art presented on the portal pages of five wireless internet (Wi-Fi) hotspots in Montréal. Artists Nicolas Fleming, Maria Legault, and Virginie Laganière have created artworks that may be viewed when users of the free service provided by Île Sans Fil log in to their accounts at the selected hotspots.

The five hotspots are rooted in specific spaces, each one with its own unique properties. The *In-Site Montréal* project grew out of a desire to augment the experience of place for Wi-Fi users, offering an additional layer of information within the hotspot environments. The artworks that are presented on the portal pages are inventive responses to the characteristics of the spaces that the hotspots inhabit.

"The window appears to look out onto a dataspace that continues beyond the borders of the window itself. [...] But the illusion quickly wears off. The window starts to feel more two-dimensional, more like a piece of paper than a portal. The view-space appears to flatten out, to the point where the window and the data contained within the window merge."ⁱ

Here Steven Johnson is describing the effects of using a scrolling window on a computer screen for the first time, and I am referring to it (ever so slightly out of context) to illustrate a point about the works that are being presented within *In-Site Montréal*. The users of the Île Sans Fil wireless network are, arguably, all hardened internet users, for whom the complexities of scrolling windows and portals and most other graphical user interface-related things are trivial. However, since they have reached the secondary stage that Johnson refers to, where the "window and the data contained within the window merge", there are certain expectations for an experience that can keep pace with their ability to leap from hyperlink to hyperlink.

Portals, by and large, are clumsy. The portal that occasionally pops up on my screen, which is associated with my Hotmail account, assumes I am interested in all manner of celebrity gossip and sports scores, and regional news for an area that is 45 miles to the west of where I currently live. But the works presented as part of *In-Site Montréal* are not attempting to form part of a portal experience that would guess the preferences of each user. The works are dealing directly with the particularities of the site where the hotspot is, which is a small enough area to be clearly defined as a common element in each user's experience. For the elite users, something at last may jump out at them from this flattened dataspace where things feel as two-dimensional and familiar as a piece of paper. Instead of the usual hurried clicking to get past a familiar "roadblock" and get to the destination they intended to go to, they may now feel that the artists of *In-Site Montréal* have added an observation on their local café, library, or artist-run centre that matters, that they can respond to, that strikes them out of their reverie.

"A provisional conclusion might be that in advanced art practices of the past thirty years the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location —grounded, fixed, actual— to a discursive vector—ungrounded, fluid, virtual."ⁱⁱ

Parts of this definition of site – fluid, virtual – are key concepts that *In-Site Montréal* works with. The layer of information that floats on top, as a meta-layer to the usual

experience of café users in the Île Sans Fil network is meant to be something a bit fluid, virtual and unexpected. The only definition that it does not fit is that of “ungrounded”, precisely because it is the grounding in the site that sets this project apart. Maria Legault’s interventions with her *Free Sugar* project may be considered particularly grounded in the sites in question. She worked with two locations, Studio XX and Café Utopik, and developed an extension of her *Free Sugar* project around both locations. At Studio XX, a feminist art centre that primarily consists of an office space and computer lab, she created a performance event entitled the *Free Sugar Salon*, that was open for anyone to attend and have the holes in their lives filled with pink pudding. She filled cracks in the architecture of Studio XX with pink icing, and then turned her attention to the attentive public that arrived at the studio, counseling them and filling their mouths with pink pudding to console them. At Café Utopik, a café/bar that regularly hosts bands and spoken word events, she conducted a surreptitious intervention, filling crevices and holes in the architecture and surrounding environment of the Café with pink icing, and documenting it in photographs. Both of these projects are presented on the portal pages of Studio XX and Café Utopik as video documentation of these actions.

Artist Virginie Laganière focused on two very different areas: the Jean-Talon Market and the area around the popular meeting place, Café Utopik. Her site-specific video pieces were shot with regular video cameras, as well as custom camera rigs attached to her body. She then manipulated the footage further in the editing suite, adding her own compositions as soundtracks and prolonging moments that happened on-camera, providing us a moment to reflect on their significance. She specifically chose to document moments where people were not as present in these spaces, and where the patterns of movement in the “off-peak” hours would become more apparent. Through her augmentations in the editing suite, she also aims to create a piece of work that allows us to see beyond our usual clouded and harried view of the urban environment, and enjoy a view of the built environment that is tranquil, constructed, and part of an aesthetic experience. In particular, her video piece presented on the portal page of the Jean-Talon Market, usually a place so buzzing with activity as to be nearly impossible to navigate, was shot in the very early hours of the morning, when market stall owners are setting up. This meditative and slow period of the Market’s activity is hidden from most of the Market’s patrons, and Virginie’s artful editing brings out the poetry in the stasis of these moments.

Nicolas Fleming's performance art videos also present us with an alternate view of our public spaces. His work is presented at Café Kafeïn and Laïka, because of both the subject matter that he chose and the locations that he performed in. At Laïka, an extremely popular and hip bar/restaurant/club, he presents *se traîner*, a piece wherein he drags himself out of his apartment (which is within the same building complex that Laïka is in) and down the stairs to an escape portal – an automatic garage door. Throughout the performance he can be heard grunting with the strain of moving himself in such an unconventional way, and by the end of this performance, he is clearly exhausted. Users viewing this video must marvel about this strange and strenuous test to his body, that took place in relative secret behind the scenes of the Laïka’s festive décor. In the other piece, *traîner un dj*, Fleming travels to Île Sainte-Hélène to encase a dj in a canvas sac, and drag him along the pavement, with the sounds of Pknic Electronique (Montréal’s outdoor summer dance club) pounding in the background. This work is presented at Kafeïn due to the dj culture that is resonant there; the dragging of a dj must be somewhat humorous to the clientele.

Telematics is a term used to designate computer-mediated communications networking involving telephone, cable, and satellite links between geographically dispersed individuals and institutions that are interfaced to data-processing systems. It involves the technology of interaction among human beings and between the human mind and artificial systems of intelligence and perception. The individual user of networks is always potentially involved in a global net, and the world is always potentially in a state of interaction with the individual.ⁱⁱⁱ

The virtual spaces that *In-site Montréal* inhabit are amorphous areas around several accepted gathering places such as cafés, galleries, markets, and bars. They are perhaps places where as an internet user, you may intend to use the opportunity of connectivity to the network to look outward, to read news of distant places or connect with friends far away through e-mails and online social networking sites. The art practice of telematics in particular addresses the creative possibilities when two parties are connected over distance to communicate. In some way, the pieces presented on the portal pages of Île Sans Fil's network as part of the *In-Site Montréal* project present something that is almost anti-telematic, in that the works look inward rather than outward. In the case of this project, a connection to someone across the globe is not sought, it is shunned in favour of a further examination and rumination on the details of the local environment. A local resident, who is perhaps used to the culture at Café Utopik, may be best able to chuckle at the video of pink icing being added to the sign above the door. This intense inward-looking that these pieces commit to is the essential point of the project. Instead of seeking to look outward and connect with others who are in a radically different geographic space, *In-Site Montréal* hopes to reconnect locals with their own space, through the language of culture, compelling users of the network to turn their gaze inward enough to consider the cultural resonances that are possible.

- Michelle Kasprzak, 2006/2007

ⁱ Steven Johnson "Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate" 1997 Harper Collins, New York. Pg 86

ⁱⁱ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity*, October 80 (Spring 97): 95.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy Ascott: "Is there love in the telematic embrace?"
http://www.receiver.vodafone.com/07/articles/03_page01.html