

# Eksperimenta!



From October 23 to November 23, 2014, teenagers fourteen to nineteen years of age, art educators, artists, people within the science disciplines, curators, and arts administrators from ten countries converged in Tallinn, Estonia. The city, situated on the Baltic Sea near Finland, was host to *Eksperimenta! 2014*, a contemporary art triennial that featured an international exhibition of youths' artworks and an IDEAlaboratory in which concepts/theories/beliefs were exchanged in a conference forum. The ultimate goal of this international gathering and exhibition is a strengthening of the network of art schools and centers through interaction, communication, and dissemination of knowledge in the visual arts and art education about contemporary issues and best practices. In this article the authors will discuss the first key area of Eksperimenta!: namely, the exhibition. We will address both the Canadian show and those from other countries.

What is *Eksperimenta!* (aka **E!**)? It is an accessible, approachable platform for the interchange of creative and pedagogical concepts in contemporary art and art education. The founder, Annely Köster, claims it is "the best-known contemporary art event for school students in the world... E! shapes Tallinn to be the 'Venice of youth art' (comparable to the Venice Art Biennale)" (Eksperimenta!, 2015). For this second convening of *Eksperimenta!* each of the participating countries, including Brazil, Canada, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Portugal, Russia, Slovenia, and Turkey established curators who spent more than a year selecting their students' artworks for the exhibition.

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## The Canadian Exhibition

As it did with the first exhibit 3 years earlier, the Canadian Society for Education through art organized a Canadian delegation for *Eksperimenta! 2014*. The three Canadian curators, Joanna Black, Ann Donald, and Peter Vietgen, situated in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario were able to attract contributions by youth in school (formal) and art museum (informal school) settings from across the country. Unlike some countries which contributed art solely from private schools, galleries, and/or museum art education settings, in Canada public schools were instrumental in bringing students' artworks to *Eksperimenta!* There were eleven art educators working at ten schools across Canada, spanning 4,500 kilometres from the coast of Vancouver to Nova Scotia<sup>1</sup>. Altogether sixty-two students from across Canada had their works selected for the exhibition, featuring a diverse variety of media ranging from digitalized design posters, photographs, mixed media works and graphic novel wall hangings, to videos, animations, and a virtual environment.

The overarching theme for *Eksperimenta! 2014* was art in relation to science. Within this, the Canadian curators selected the subtheme of technology, believing that, in relation to science, technology has greatly affected our children's lives as they become immersed in the culture of the Internet and social media (Jenkins, 2009; Tapscott, 2009). This focus drew upon the Canadian theorist, Marshall McLuhan, whose insights about the social consequences of media technologies which were just emerging when he wrote in the 1960s (McKenzie, 2013) have become a part of our perspective and our worldview: technologically driven art and media is indeed the cultural zeitgeist of our times. Consequently, the curators wanted to experience young Canadian's perspectives about their changing domain and their lived experiences.

Technology as a vital subtheme in Canada's contribution to *Eksperimenta!* played three key roles: as tools, text (Hlynka & Hlynka, 2011) and point of critique. In Marshall McLuhan's universal Laws of Media (McMahon & Sobelman, 2002) he explains that tools are extensions of people's own bodies (McMahon & Sobelman, 2002). As such, tools in art practices are the means by which art is created, varying from the humble pencil and paintbrush to the use of computer hardware and software. In the case of the Canadian youth, all used digital technology to create their own art, ranging from PC to MAC platforms using such software as Photoshop, and Adobe Illustrator, to Final Cut Pro. Second, the final artworks students created are texts, as defined by Hlynka & Hlynka (2011), which served to communicate the diversity of thinking and imagination in Canada to an international audience in Tallinn. In sharing their visual texts, students' roles changed from the traditional consumer who merely acquires information (via technology such as the Internet) into a prosumer or creator<sup>2</sup> (Black, 2014).



The third key role of technology in the Canadian exhibition is most important. Many of the students chose to comment in their text about technology and science. They wanted to have their voices heard. One of the art educators, Greg Chomchiuk, states that his students, “needed to find their own subjective viewpoint and extrapolate the message ... Each student approached the problem their own way with their own personality and their own agenda ... The students overcame difficulties in the making of their own art by continuing to develop their ideas. Each student did multiple sketches and mock ups, reviewed their work with their teachers and peers” (Eksperimenta!, 2014). Similarly, teachers Sarah Falls and Liz Lancaster wrote that, “Participating in this project gave them [teenagers] the opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences and how daily life is impacted by living in a highly technological world” (Eksperimenta!, 2014).

Students approach the content of their artwork in different ways. In the video Up, they explored issues pertaining to their own biological and mental growth. Pasishnik and Wong delve into ideas about their own and other people’s unconscious and Lazaris, Patel and Mitchell investigate gender issues. Others, including Shoemaker and Richardson, pay homage to the master of art, science and technology, the great Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci. Some participants wrote about technology’s benefits; many about its detrimental impact.



Specific artworks enable students to speak eloquently about their own attitudes towards technology. In these works Canadian youth portray great playfulness, skill, and complexities: in the video, *I Will Not Hatch* by Gao, Sevier, Di Tommaso, and Zheng portray a dark vision. It is a sophisticated solo dance, strikingly choreographed, exquisitely shot, and expertly edited, in which the opening scene begins with a long shot of a young woman positioned in a fetal position. It quickly cuts to a close up of her, where, like a bird coming out of a nest, she explores her immediate world. Following this, a hand emerges to grab her, and subsequently more hands are placed on her head, symbolic of oppression, positioning her as a victim of a harsh, overpowering situation from which she needs to escape. Sadly, she returns to the fetal position, and thus, while eluding repression, she also flees from her own freedom to the small, protective, confining

situation of the opening shot of the video. Another stunning work, a digital photograph by Logan Pasishnik entitled, *Window to the Soul*, depicts a serious youth looking directly into the camera. The right brown eye has a unswervingly fixed focus on the viewer while the left eye is covered by a camera lens, making it seem as if the skin of the youth's face has been ripped apart to reveal eerily strange, unexpected and jarring optical equipment. The right cheek is cut in a star shape, revealing computer wires appearing from within the flesh, indicating robotic, controlled imagery. The work reveals the young artists' perspective of technological determinism (Black, 2002): namely that technology is shaping youths into robotic, mechanized, automated beings and thus is indeed affecting their perspective of the world.

A final work is produced by ten students at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), all members of the AGO's youth council. The AGO youth council includes youths 14 – 25 years of age, who meet on a weekly basis to plan community art projects with local and international guest artists as their mentors. The art installation by the AGO youth council at *Eksperimenta! 2014*, was entitled *UGLY 2.0* (Unified Geniuses Living Young) and was comprised of two parts. The first component was an interactive digital adaptation of the original Art Gallery of Ontario, *UGLY 1.0* exhibition that was created by the youth council for an event held a few months earlier. This digital adaptation was set up to engage the viewing audience in Tallinn, Estonia, through encouraging viewers to take part in a live video game that was set up in a dark space in the Canadian exhibition area. This game involved the theme of exchange and belonging and was fostered through a Surrealist camp environment in a virtual space. In it, users explored five virtual environments featuring collaborative gaming principles. The second component of the AGO youth council installation, was a live printmaking station that invited viewers to create prints using inks and premade silk screens that were brought from the event held for youth a few months earlier in Toronto. Each of the print designs made reference to various characters and players in the digital video game. This connection between the interactive digital video game and the traditional art practice of printmaking, proved to be a huge hit with the hundreds of youth that attended the opening of the *Eksperimenta!* exhibition. The AGO had an optimistic view of technology pointing to the seamless flow from traditional to digital ideologies.





How do other students view technology? What is expressed in their art? One of the Canadian students, Baschuk, notes its push/pull effect, discussing both the positive and the frustrating aspects for contemporary youth. Just as McLuhan's four laws of media, elucidated key questions regarding the fallout and backlash of new technological developments for humankind (McMahon & Sobelman, 2002), some students portrayed the darker side of technology. Degan, Daguio and Wark's art conveys their reactions of anxiety, stress, depression, and of being overwhelmed. Purteil, Dao, and Le examine the impact of technology in relation to environmental devastation and sustainability. Rocan, Shoemaker, and Lamoureux discuss their ideas of looking into the past in order to shed light on the future. Key questions are asked. An example is the student Bruin Pol who expresses opposing ideas toward technology:

How is technology affecting our lives? There are many types of technology out there that we need to see, realize and ask: 'Is this putting me in danger?' Does this mean that technology is bad or is there technology that has been invented for a reason that adds meaning and value to our lives? (Pol, personal communication, March, 2014)



### Exhibitions from Other Countries

In 2014 ten countries participated in *Eksperimenta!* This truly international exploration of themes and ideas through the practice of contemporary art making created a stage for young people to showcase their technical, theoretical and creative skills of expression through art.

Having taken part in the first *Eksperimenta!* triennial back in 2011, Germany returned with a strong exhibition created by students from the *International Munich Art Lab* (IMAL), a program that was founded in 1996. Established for youth of Munich between 16-25, IMAL is a tuition-free program that employs artists and social workers to work with unemployed young people who hold a keen interest in art and who wish to focus on a life career in the arts. The basis of IMAL is art production through dialogue negotiated between artists and participants. Students stay with IMAL for one year, developing a portfolio of work. After this intense period of studio production roughly 96% participants begin their professional career, work, or take part in internships with potential employers. An important component of participation in IMAL also involves students curating exhibitions of their own and other students' art. Extending this curatorial practice to the *Eksperimenta!* exhibition, the team from Germany brought 15 youth participants to Estonia who each contributed to the curatorship and installation of the German exhibition.

One German IMAL participating, youth artist, Julius Ertelt, produced a socially sensitive and research-based work entitled *Spotted*. In *Spotted*, Ertelt created a powerful installation which consisted of seven large photographs, each approximately 16 x 20 inches, displayed in a horizontal row at eye level. These seven photographs were of friends of the artist and each was selected for a defining look or feature in their outward appearance. Ertelt had first displayed these



diverse portrait photographs in a public forum in Munich. Inviting viewer participation, a long, narrow table stood underneath the photographs, on which were pads of writing paper. Viewers were asked to write down their “first impressions” of each individual they saw in the photographs. This installation was recreated in Tallinn, once again, inviting the viewer to engage with the piece. In Ertelt’s artist statement he writes, “We only get one chance to leave a first impression. But what do we really think when we see each other for the first time?” (*Eksperimenta! 2014* catalogue, p. 48). Ertelt continues “Assessing and pigeon-holing somebody should not be the centre of human interaction. It is about embracing our individuality, culturally and personally.” Striking to all who viewed and experienced this work, Ertelt was honoured by the international jury as one of the three most inspiring artists participating in the 2014 *Eksperimenta!* exhibition.

The host country of Estonia also created a very compelling exhibition consisting of works varying greatly in media and approach. The Estonian curator entitled their overall exhibition “Social Ecology”. Through this lens, they strove to take a step forward and tried “to find connections between ecology and society by means of art” (*Eksperimenta! 2014* catalogue, p. 10). In her curatorial concept, the Estonian curator, Mari Kartau, shares,

The fundamental truths of ecology could be termed the laws of nature. And these also apply to humans. In one respect, however, people differ from the rest of animals – when we believe it’s our advantage, we call our choices and decisions laws of nature, while at other times, we tend to reshape and transform nature according to our own will. (p. 10)

Exploring this theme of connecting ecology and society through contemporary art making, one young Estonian artist, Marie Jogi, created a sculptural work that looked at existential questions through a scientific and cultural prism in her piece entitled “The Future is Our Choice”.

In this work, Jogi used a variety of materials to explore the connection of humans and technological development through the symbol of two life-size human fetuses, each resting in a nurturing nest of sorts, suspending from the ceiling, as if belonging to a family of birds. One fetus appeared healthy and lay in a nest of branches and fresh greenery, while the other, lay in a nest made of cold, entwined wiring with a pronounced wire/cable umbilical cord coming out of its stomach. This powerful piece, another that left a strong impression on all those viewed it, earned the young Estonian, artist Marie Jogi, the honour of also being one of the top three aspiring artists participating in the 2014 Eksperimenta! exhibition.



### Conclusion

The opportunity to work towards an international exhibition is invaluable for youth and educators alike. This entails specifically for teenagers to brainstorm ideas, explore a theme, research personal concepts, develop skills in media production, complete the artworks, plan for exhibiting their art with other youth from the same country, and finally partake in an international exhibition through attending *Eksperimenta!* and/or seeing the work on the Internet, in the *Eksperimenta!* catalogue, and through social media. In all, participating youth are not only given the opportunity to communicate their own ideas to an international audience but also to witness how other students from around the world have tackled and explored the same themes using a variety of media. Since *Eksperimenta!*'s inception in 2011, sharing artistic ideas and visions has been key uniting students in a common artistic cause: the exploration of a theme, the commitment to creating their best artworks possible, to share these works with an international public, and to engage in a common dialogue between individual youth from Brazil to Russia.

We would like to thank the Canadian team -- art teachers, art administrators and students who were involved in the exhibition and were instrumental in its success. Their hard work and dedication was evident in their final artworks. Many of the Canadian artworks from both *Eksperimenta!* 2011 and 2014 are now housed at the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba on permanent display for visitors, students and faculty to view. We appreciate the generosity of students and art educators involved in the exhibitions who donated these works. The Canadian Society for Education through Art (CSEA) looks forward to hearing about the next theme to be explored for *Eksperimenta!* again planned to be held in Tallinn, Estonia in 2017.

## Footnotes

- 1 These schools include Bishop James Mahoney Catholic School; Earl Haig Secondary School; Enver Creek Secondary School; Holy Cross High School; Horton High School; Lauren Hill Academy; Northview Heights Secondary School; Sentinel Secondary School; St. Catharines Collegiate; and St James Collegiate. From these schools, eleven art educators are involved: Margaret Belisle; Dave Buttinger; Greg Chomichuk; Sharon Erskine; Sarah Falls; Liz Lancaster; Joel Searcy; Barbara Sunday; Paul Syme; Karen Park Thompson; and Katherine Yamashita. Additionally, we were fortunate to work with The Art Gallery of Ontario's (AGO) Youth Council, overseen by Syrus Marcus Ware, along with Pam Patterson, the art administrator/educator from WIAprojects, and the Art and Design Education Lab (ADEL). The AGO Youth Council also worked with artists and designers from the Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU) including Allanah Dymond, Peter Rahul, Echo Railton, Cassidy Tam, and Mary Tremonte.
- 2 For a more in-depth discussion of these ideas by McLuhan and the Hlynkas refer to Black's article (2014).
- 3 For a discussion of technological determinism refer to Black's work (2002) which defines the term.

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