

On harnessing the creative potential of technology



Digital artist and curator Alex Czetwertynski on the pitfalls of working in new media, and what it means to create immersive art that you need to experience to really understand.

September 12, 2018 -

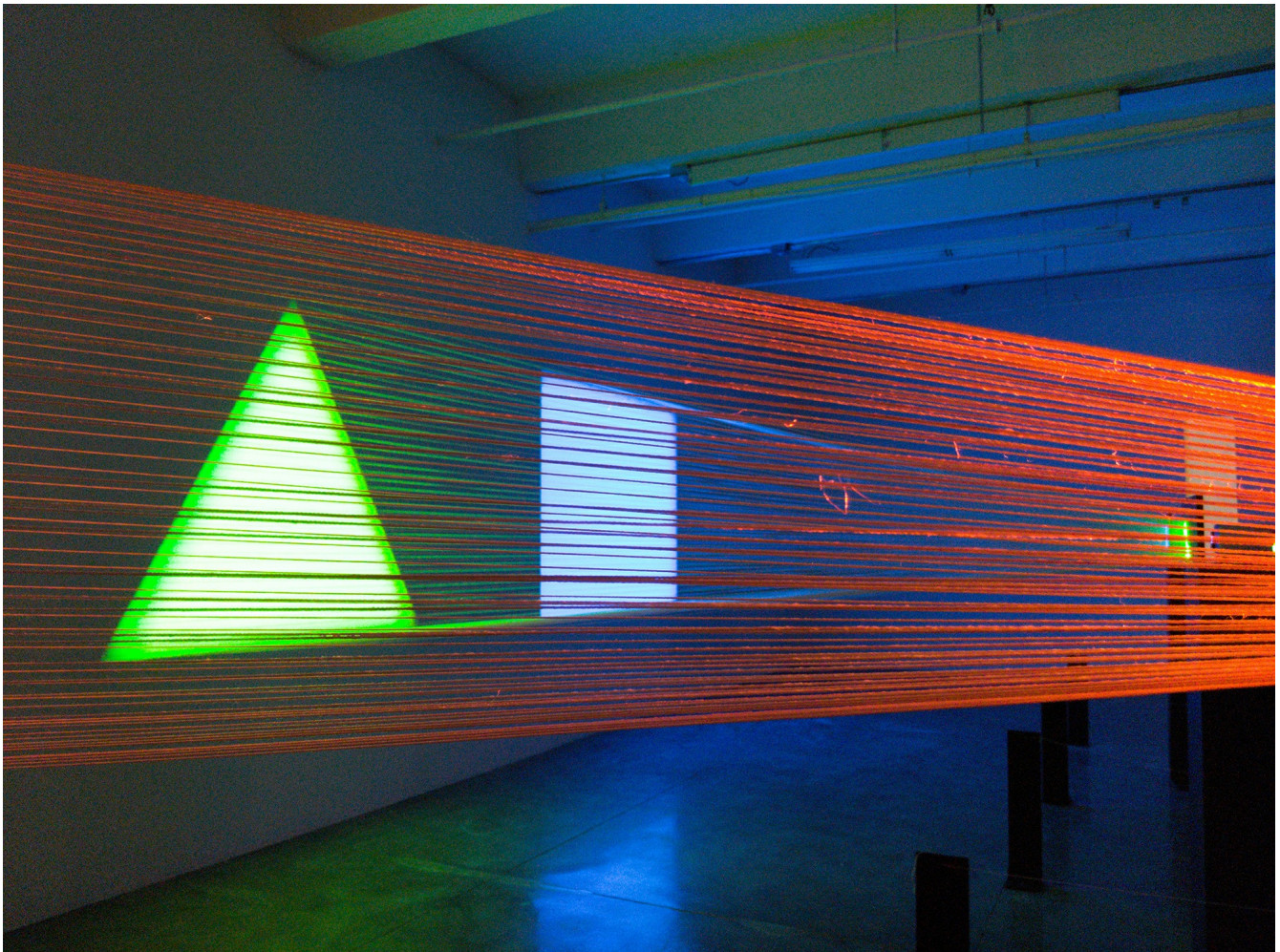
As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2814 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Technology](#), [Curation](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [Production](#), [Creative anxiety](#).

How did your creative practice develop? Were you always interested in working with technology?

The beginning for me was all about filmmaking. That was my adolescent idea of myself as a grown-up. I pursued that for a while. I did internships and went to a film school. I started a company in France. My goal was to teach myself filmmaking by working for clients and doing documentaries and things like that. As I was doing that work, I started getting more excited about animated graphics and visual effects for the films that I was making rather than the shooting and editing.

After I moved to the U.S., I got a job at a concert-graphics creative-direction company, which was a very niche thing at the time. We would create visuals for big tours like Madonna and Rihanna and Beyoncé, people like that. It would also sometimes involve designing the screens that these images were going to be displayed on. I was already excited about the technology of visual effects and graphics, but I was starting to get into generative code-driven graphics as well. I started seeing how you could connect visuals that are created by code with a moving screen that was also somehow communicating with your software. I was like, "Oh, all of a sudden all of this media can live in space and it can move around and there can be this idea of a physical presence for media that's more than a projection on a wall or flat screen."



That really triggered a lot of thinking around technology used in the context of media creation. Little by little, as I was going deeper into this spacial media world, I started realizing that media could also be seen as a form of lighting since the fundamentals of digital images are essentially lights. That led me to more of an exploration of light as a support for media. I started to understand the creative potential of technology.

How long did it take before you started just doing your own site-specific pieces?

It took about five or six years for me to start doing that. For a long time I was trying to figure out what was possible. It was like being in a new field. It wasn't completely new but there weren't a lot of people doing it and it felt like discoveries were being made on a weekly basis. It was an exciting period where you felt that you were in a field that was still

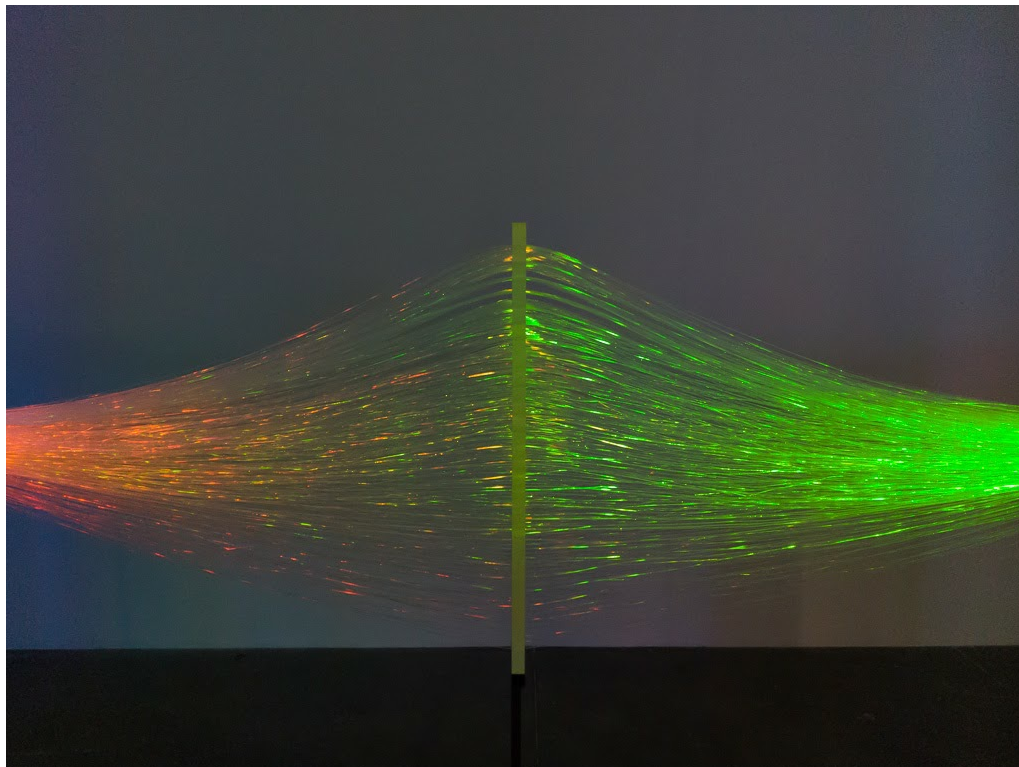
defining itself. I think that's still the case today—this immersive, new-media art world is not completely formed. It's still shifting. I had to digest a lot of information before I felt comfortable expressing myself.

For a lot of visual artists who may have a studio-based practice, the studio is a site of exploration. When you're working with complicated technology, how does that process work? Does it begin conceptually and then you find technology to support that concept?

There's one tool, which we call Previz, that's extremely useful in technology-driven art. Essentially you're trying to replicate the work you're going to make in real life on a computer or in a 3D space. People have also been using virtual reality to visualize how things will look. It's obviously difficult to prototype at large scales or using certain gear that you might not have a budget for until a specific moment. It's about having an idea and trying to flesh it out as much as possible, usually using digital tools, and then maybe making a small-scale version with real tools. It does require a leap of faith that things are going to work when you finally go full-scale.

The kind of trial and error involved in that must be intense.

It is. I had my first solo show open recently. After I'd had a few days to process the opening, I was thinking about the things I made. I had actually *not* prototyped almost any of the work. I imagined them and I had conversations with fabricators and people who were helping me, but while I was putting the show together, I was watching these pieces essentially come to life. You realize that however well you plan it and however many renderings you look at, there's always that surprise moment of, "Oh, how is this gonna react in this space? Will this actually work?" Sometimes certain materials react in ways that you can't plan. It just happens like that. Sometimes it's great and sometimes it's almost like a failure, but it's ultimately all about the readjusting you do to make it work.

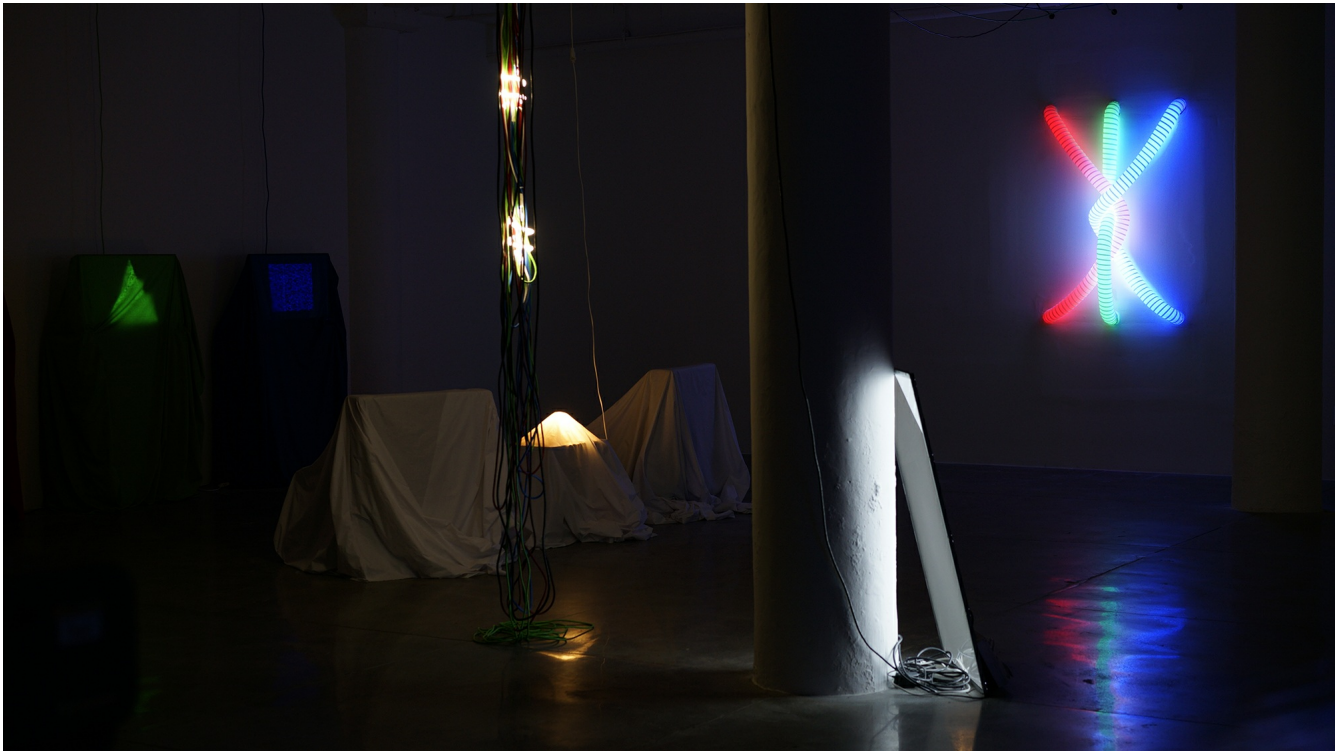


When a piece doesn't work—or say, when it suddenly stops working—it must be terrifying.

It is! There is this sense that we created the technology and if we've put all the pieces in place for it to work... it should work, right? I have a firm belief that technology has some kind of soul, and the more pieces of technology that you put together, the more impossible it becomes to fully understand the connection between everything. I think that there are people who are technology whisperers, and who have an ability to somehow pacify the beast or the gremlins in the machine that others don't. When you see how people interact with computers sometimes, you can see that. There are people who are very comfortable with machines and will always manage to make it work, and there are those people who will always have problems. At times, I think there's almost an electrical connection we have with this gear.

When you're making work that is complicated and involves different kinds of equipment and gear and space, how much of your job as a creator is spent just convincing people to give you funding and opportunity?

A lot. I think that it's all about finding the right groups of people that are interested in showing this kind of work and the people that are willing to collaborate with you. I was lucky to find these kinds of people pretty quickly, but I can see how it's a challenge. One of the reasons I do curatorial work with a festival like *Day for Night* is because it gives me an opportunity to help other people show this kind of work.



For a young artist who is primarily interested in using technology as their medium, what advice do you have? What are the best resources?

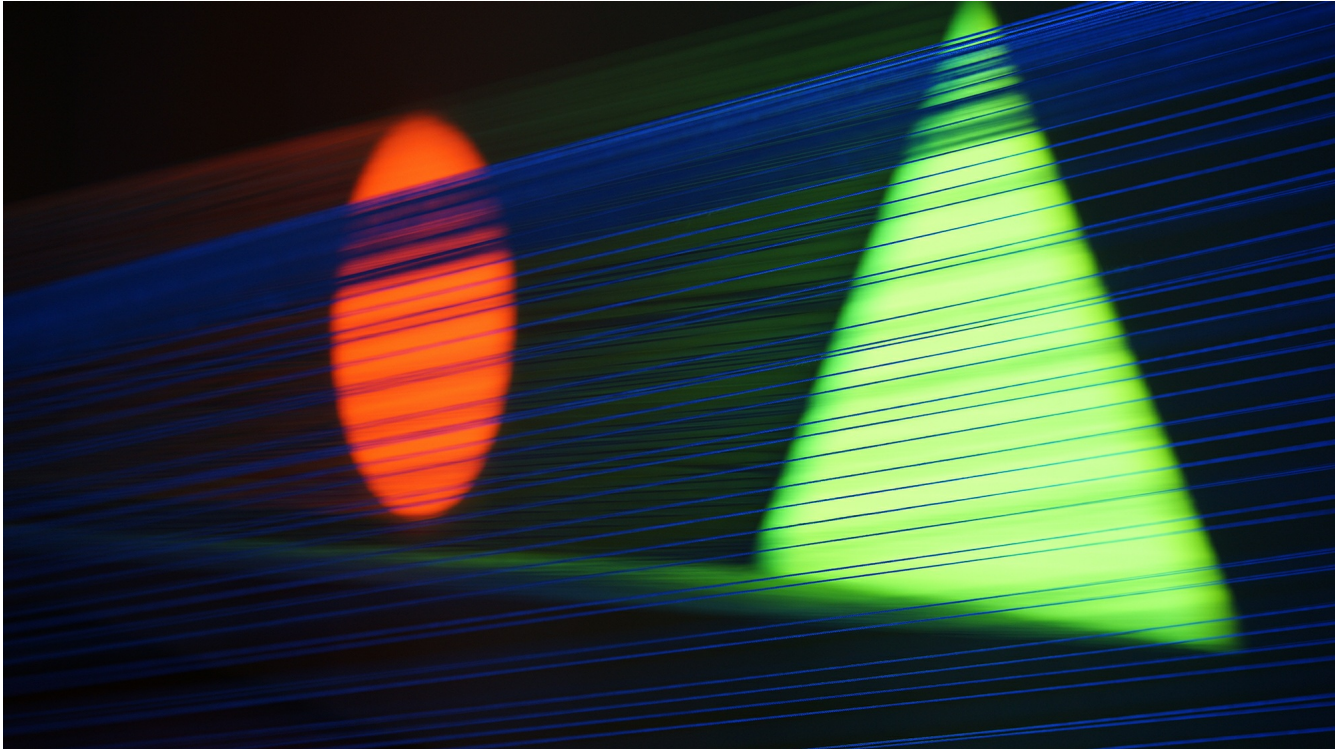
I think those resources still need to be made. Something that I'm personally interested in is trying to find ways to somehow collect information from a lot of different places and make it available to people who are working in this field. There are great websites that will essentially provide inspirational material or case studies that are helpful, but because of the amount of information that you need to digest and put together to create projects that are contemporary and really use the tools that are available today, it takes a lot of patience. Right now the resources are scattered and I feel like we're in a time where it would be good to start creating better programs in schools to actually support the development of this sort of knowledge.

A lot of this knowledge, I would assume, you learn by trial and error. You don't necessarily learn in art school that these kinds of cables don't attach to these kinds of cables. You learn by making a piece.

You also learn a lot by talking to people who have done projects and will tell you things like, "I was using this particular piece of hardware and it failed, so I had to replace it with this, which really did a great job. Never use that other thing." That's not information that's readily available.

One of the criticisms of this kind of technologically-driven art is often that, while visually dazzling, it can also feel empty. All this technological razzle-dazzle doesn't mean much if it's not actually in service of a compelling idea.

I have strong opinions about that. I think that doing stuff for the sake of technology is a huge mistake because it just undermines the work of people who are using it to express good ideas. What ends up happening is you see a lot of dazzling technology but it's so weak conceptually that people tend to think that that's what this kind of art represents. You see that so much when you go to places like South by Southwest or these big events where a lot of brands spend money to have shiny lights blinking in your face. You look at it for five minutes and you say, "Okay, I'm gonna go get a free drink now." Because there's nothing really to think about.



I feel like it's important to disassociate between those things, which are really just a use of technology only to "wow" people, and then the people who are actually doing work where they're trying to question technology, or the role that a specific technology plays in our lives, as a way to better understand it. Also, there is plenty of work made with technology that actually has nothing to do with technology itself. It's more about a feeling that you have about being alive or being in subliminal space and what your connection is with reality or with others. Things like that. I think it's definitely the kind of thing that exists and that needs to be promoted but definitely not confused with the "blinky shiny lights" stuff.

Are your works generally concept-driven? Is that how they start, separate from the materials?

It's usually not separated. The ideas come together. It's usually about a proximity to a certain type of situation—either a type of idea that I'm thinking of, or something that's been bothering me, will somehow work in conjunction with certain types of tools or materials I've been around. They tend to grow together. It's almost like if you put two plants in a pot and they eventually coil together. It's very rare that it'll be like, "This is an idea that I have now. What am I going to use to execute it." The two generally emerge in my mind already connected.

What constitutes a successful piece? Is it about the piece itself, or is it also about seeing people in the space reacting to it?

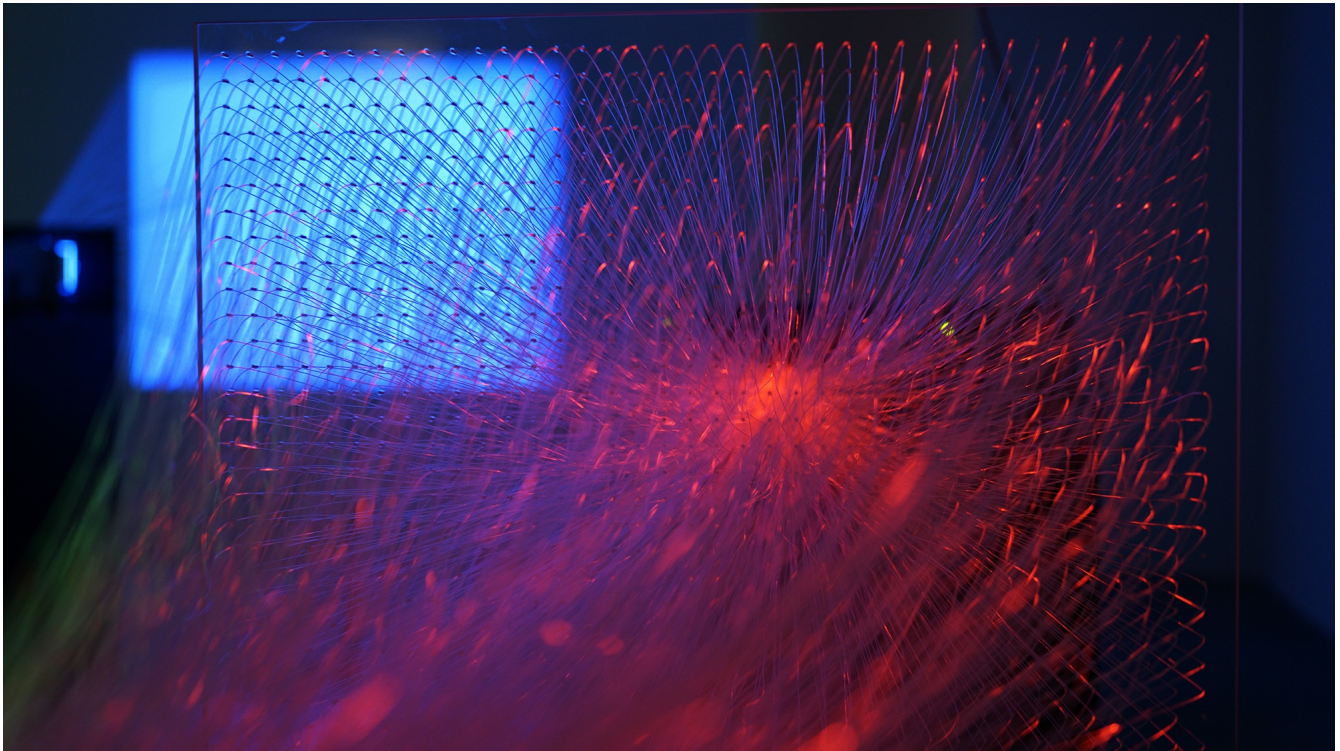
I think the work is successful if you look at it and you don't immediately grasp it completely. If I can corner it conceptually and be like, "Okay, this is exactly what I wanted to do," then I typically feel like I've made a gimmick, more than a successful artwork. I think when you see people's reaction you can very quickly understand that if they look confused, that's actually a good thing. If they look like, "That's cool," and then they look at it for two minutes and take a picture and move away, it's way less satisfying than somebody looking like they're trying to get it, like they're mentally filling in the blanks.

I like feeling that the piece has escaped from somewhere and is doing its own thing. Even if what it's doing is not what I necessarily wanted, or if I don't necessarily agree with the results. That's a kind of success. That feeling of not being able to completely put my finger on it is usually a good sign.

I know there is a tremendous amount of planning that happens with your work, but you must also be pretty good at solving problems on the fly and being able to quickly adapt when something isn't behaving the way you expected.

Absolutely. There are some very serendipitous moments that can happen when things don't go as planned. Recently I was doing this project, and I had a very specific piece of hardware that I wanted to use that came from a manufacturer in Korea. There was only one of them. They shipped it to me in this very special box that they built and I opened it and it looked great. A special technician came to install the piece because it was very delicate. We turned it on and realized there was a crack in it that was only visible when you turned it on. It completely destroyed the intention of the piece, but the crack was so beautiful that we were like, "Okay, this is something completely different now."

The amount of time that you put in will never eliminate all the variables. I think this is even more true when you're doing immersive pieces. Let's say you're transforming a room into an experience. It completely escapes you after a certain point. If you do a good job and you create the right conditions, it can be almost self-sustaining. You can't totally predict what's going to happen.

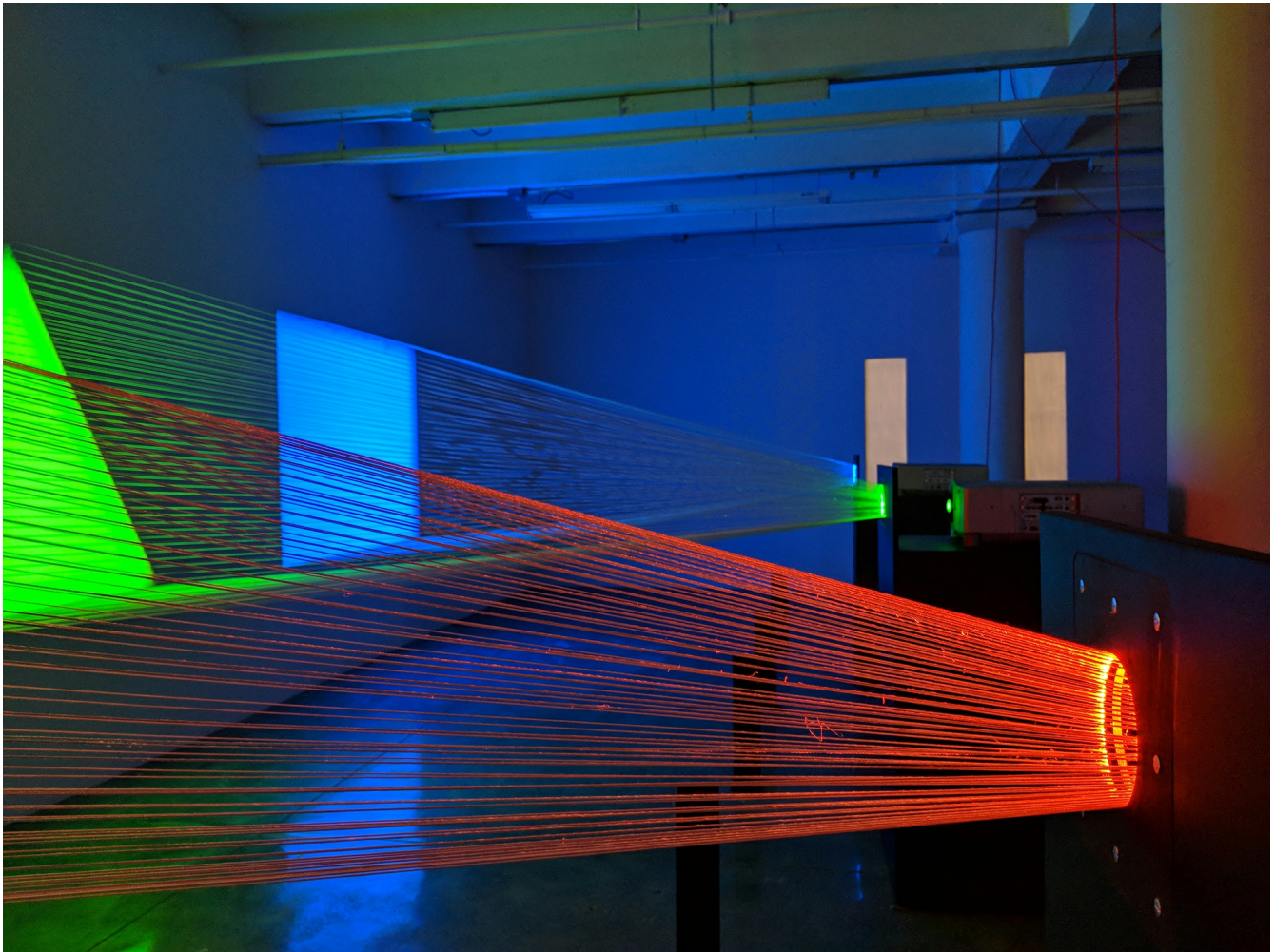


Through *Day For Night* you're able to shine a light on this kind of work. When curating this sort of work, what are you generally looking for?

In the case of *Day For Night*, I reach out to a lot of people and there are also lots of people that apply. This type of art, let's call it "new media art" to make it simple, is so amorphous right now, it doesn't really have a place to live. I'm in this privileged position of being able to bring forward things that I think are the best of that world. It's about trying to find a good balance between people who have been doing this for long enough that their names are fairly established, but also people that are at the beginning of their career but are already so promising that you wanna give them a push.

When you're doing this kind of new media art, what does it mean in terms of documentation? The experience of these pieces depends on being there in the room with them. Do any of them get to live on in other spaces?

Sometimes they do. The documentation is only as good as you can capture with a regular camera. We've done some documentation in virtual reality and it still lacks, of course, the feeling of being in the space. I think that's one of the things about this kind of art that's interesting. It's very sexy to photograph, but at the same time, it's impossible to convey what it was like to be there. It's Instagram friendly, but it's also Instagram non-friendly because people can't really get it unless they were there.



The ephemeral nature of it is what makes it so special. Most of these pieces are working on all of your senses. You just had to be there.

Yes. It's multi-sensorial for sure, which you can't really duplicate, but it's also about the people who were in there with you. You're never going to be by yourself. There is that communal experience that happens. Maybe you could get that to a certain extent if you were in theater or watching a performance, but when you're standing in a room and moving around and seeing how others are experiencing the work, it becomes a different thing. You're also getting a little bit of their experience and they're getting a little bit of yours. It's a very particular moment in time. It's hard to create... and impossible to replicate. That's the idea.



All images from Alex Czetwertynski's *First Light*, which was presented at Mana Contemporary in early 2018.

Alex Czetwertynski recommends:

Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. Besides being one of most powerful novels ever written, it also seems to be so perfectly attuned to our times (despite having been written in the first half of the 20th century).

The films of *Nicholas Roeg*, *Donald Cammell*, and *Peter Weir*. They may seem disconnected, but all share a boldness in both style and subject that is extremely rare these days.

The full 20 minutes of *Can's "Yoo Doo Right"*, because it manages to be both primal and sophisticated in the same breath.

Gregory Bateson's *Steps Towards an Ecology of Mind*. Bateson is one of the only thinkers who makes you think with your heart.

David Altmejd's sculptures. The most visceral any sculptor can get with the human figure.

Name

Alex Czetwertynski

Vocation

Digital artist, Curator

