COULD YOU TALK ABOUT

CAMILLE
SCHERRER

MBAL

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Interview by Joël Vacheron

CAN YOU TELL US HOW YOU STARTED, NOTABLY THE REASONS THAT LED YOU TO BECOME INTERESTED IN AUGMENTED REALITY?

To summarize, I could say that it is the result of a series of coincidences. I never thought I would be destined to take this direction. I grew up in the Pays-d'Enhaut, under a fir tree, and I spent my childhood running free in alpine pastures and eating double cream. I only began to regularly go to the valley when I started my studies at Burier's high school, near Montreux. I was far from everything and new technologies were not part of my environment at all. We got our first television at home when I was 10 and we had our first computer much later. In hindsight, it seems obvious that this relative isolation, as well as my close relationship with nature, have been major factors in the direction taken in my projects. The first trigger was when I was preparing for my Maturity certificate. I had created illusions by bringing together discordant sounds and images. To my great surprise, the project was very well received, but I had not yet a clear idea where it could take me. After my studies, I wanted to train as a clown but it was still rather vague. At the time, I was interested in an artistic career because I thought it would allow me to continue running free in alpine pastures. I was still so naïve! Things took shape thanks to a second coincidence. During a six-month language course in Seville, I was so bored that a teacher suggested I take cinema classes at the university as an unregistered student. It was very interesting and that is why I took, on the off-chance, the entrance exam to the Film Studies department of the Ecole cantonale d'art in Lausanne (ECAL), by simply sending the project undertaken for my Maturity certificate as it was. It worked out straight away, I saw it as a sign and it motivated me to continue in that direction.

Video commissioned by Louis Vuitton for a book release, 2009

HOW DID YOU MOVE FROM FILM STUDIES TO INTERACTIVE INSTALLATIONS?

I had a rather difficult first year in the Film Studies department. The projects were very introspective and, as I am jovial by nature, I quickly realised that I didn't have the right profile for this type of training. I was about to leave ECAL when a teacher advised me to change department rather than giving it all up. I followed his advice and that is how I ended up in the Media & Interaction Design department. I discovered a world that was totally foreign to me, but it immediately fascinated me! I quickly understood the challenges and potential of this emerging technology and from that moment I became a total "geek". I spent all my studies discovering a wide range of technologies ranging from electronics to computer vision algorithms. Every time we were shown an example, I always wanted to know more. At that time, the environments created with these technologies were often redundant and I immediately decided not to follow the futuristic aesthetics commonly used for this type of representation. Rather than using the codes from science fiction or high-tech imagery, I developed a simple language, sometimes integrating cut paper animations, old photographs and all sorts of real materials. This is how the fusion between my rural origins and the world of computer technology took place. I realised that people were interested in this type of relationship, both simple and unprecedented. That is how people started calling me "Geek Heidi".

IN 2008, YOUR INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION *LE MONDE DES MONTAGNES* (2008) WON THE PIERRE BERGÉ PRIZE FOR THE BEST EUROPEAN DESIGN DIPLOMA. IN WHAT CONTEXT WAS THIS PROJECT CREATED?

In 2008, augmented reality did not really exist. It was a field where a lot of work still had to be done. This work required the use of extremely complex technologies, most of which were specifically developed for this project. As for the theme, I cannot remember exactly why I started in that direction. I just had this old dream of finding an original way to make the illustrations in a book move. At the time, the distinction between screen and paper was not as evident as it is today. We were at the beginning of major changes that took place in publishing. So I kind of improvised from a very simple, even naive idea, driven by my all-consuming passion for technology. This led me to inquire about the research being carried out at the Ecole polytechnique fédérale in Lausanne (EPFL) and I met a team that worked on augmented reality projects applied to very specific and utilitarian domains. Our first contacts were not easy and it required a lot of cheek on my part. At that time, collaborations between art and science were far and few between and I had to be convincing to justify the merits of my project. Luckily, I met a fairly open-minded researcher who provided me with the programs they had developed. These were only codes that I had to interpret and compile so they better met my needs. I totally dedicated myself to this task for several months and managed to develop a few prototypes that brought me into ever more complex areas from a technical point of view. I worked almost alone to develop an operational yet simple program, designed from a very powerful algorithm developed at EPFL.

HOW DID THE ENGINEERS WHO ALSO WORKED WITH THESE TECHNOLOGIES REACT?

In science, projects are often developed in the context of fundamental research and there is no real need to
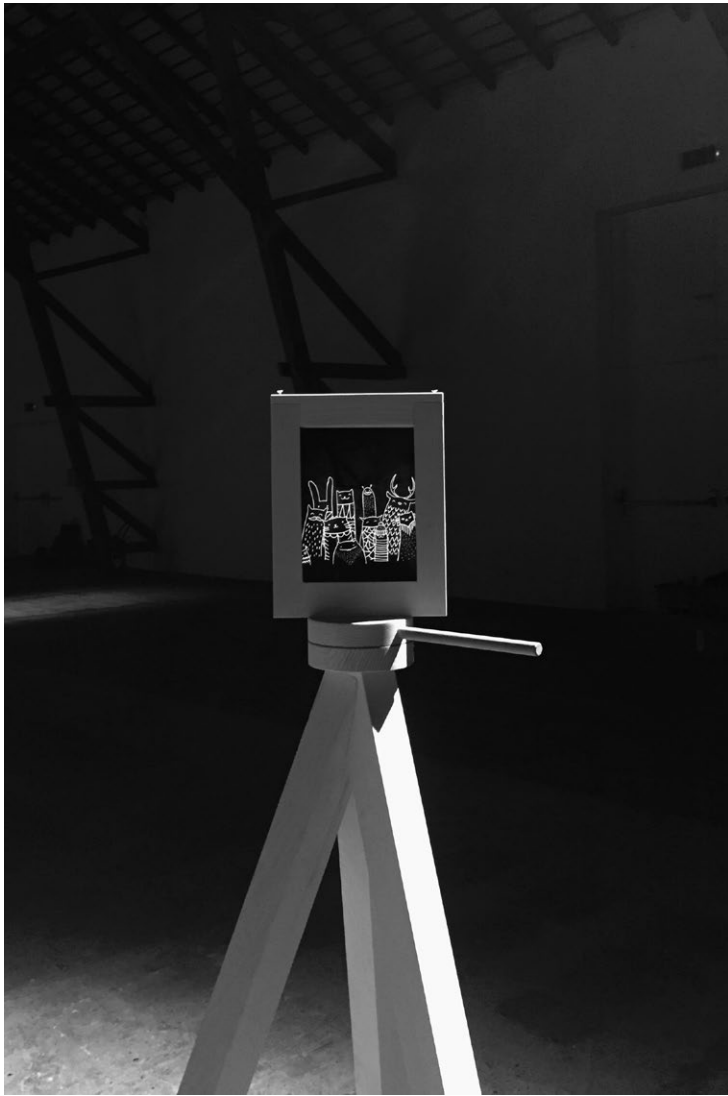
La guignette, 2016

show them to the public. We have enriched each other and I have often been invited to scientific symposia to show what could be gained from the relationship between art and science. At the time, it was not as common as it is today. My idea was to find a simple way for these technologies to raise the public interest and, in this regard, I have a rather amusing anecdote. The computer scientist I worked with told me that it was the first time his grandmother understood what he was doing! These collaborations between art and science allow a certain openness, creating interest in areas that would otherwise be confined to laboratories. As far as I am concerned, I was not the first to crossover, but recently the Haus der elektronischen Künste (HEK) in Basel absolutely wanted to have my diploma work in their collection because, after some research, they realized that it was pioneering in this very aesthetic approach to augmented reality.

WHAT WOULD BE YOUR DEFINITION OF AUGMENTED REALITY?

For me, augmented reality is primarily based on technological criteria and different levels of access to reality. At first glance, one could distinguish, on the one hand, the "physical" reality, which refers to material things that are directly accessible. And on the other, the "virtual" reality that is produced using computer simulations unrelated to material things. "Augmented" reality is somewhere in between. The advantage of augmented reality is precisely that it is at an intermediate level, as it makes it possible to alternate between projects based on the computer dimension and others on the material dimension. People immediately liked augmented reality, for there is a particular poetic dimension in the way of experiencing reality through elements that are both visible and intangible. In my work, I play with this

poetic dimension, especially by trying to achieve a perfect balance between real and virtual, so that one is not more intrusive than the other. The two domains must be complementary and merge into one another. In a way, it makes things easier to access and avoids building a wall of references that are too complicated. Besides, when I have to test the relevance of an augmented reality project, I always ask my grandmother and my daughters. If they understand it then I know that it works!

THIS FUSION BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE VIRTUAL IS PARTICULARLY VISIBLE IN A WORK CALLED *IN THE WOODS* (2010), CAN YOU TELL US IN A FEW WORDS ABOUT THIS EMBLEMATIC PROJECT?

In the Woods is a project designed as part of the 2010 Mapping Festival in Geneva. Since that date, I show it at least ten times a year around the world. The concept is very simple. A halo of light is projected onto a wall, and as you pass through it, shapes of animal heads are superimposed onto your shadow. There is thus a perfect fusion between the real shadow of the person and the virtual shadow added by the programme. Although the idea is extremely simple, it is always surprising to see how the installation can be experimented with differently in diverse contexts. Once again, children are a great audience because they understand the concept very quickly and like to test the limits of the system. For example, as part of my first solo exhibition at the Ferme Asile in Sion (2016), I set up a monumental version of *In The Woods*. Groups of teenagers living around used to spend their afternoons in the exhibition space. They had somehow appropriated the place and, as the days went by, had become experts in testing the boundaries and even the small faults in the exhibited works. This created interesting situations because they sometimes

managed to anticipate or control certain features of the program that I had not even planned. My installations never include explanations or advice on how to use them, I prefer to let people experiment as they wish, at the risk of sometimes things not happening as planned.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE ORIGIN OF YOUR PROJECT AT MBAL?

The origin of the project dates back to my exhibition at the Ferme Asile, as this experience motivated me to make more and more material based installations. When I first started, I was interested in programming and creating "virtual" environments, but my current projects tend to be more sculptural. I have wanted to do something based on public telescopes for a long time. Since I was a little girl, I have always liked to play with those big objects that squeak when you turn them and often give you a really blurry image of reality. The idea of a small window on the world has always interested me and it is all the more relevant with augmented reality technology, which often gives the viewer the chance to see reality through a telescope or a viewfinder. For my installation at MBAL, my idea was to reinterpret this public viewfinder idea in my own way, giving it a wooden base and an iPad on which geometric shapes appear and disappear continuously according to the movements of the telescope. I always create very illustrative projects, often with animals or rural scenes. For this project, I wanted to develop a more abstract "landscape" that covered the walls of the exhibition space. It is a way of evolving my visual language and I wanted to see how far I could go to create detailed narratives, while remaining as minimalist as possible figuratively speaking. The narrative is no longer part of the image or the drawing itself, but in the random associations that occur when manipulating the telescope. I have indeed

always wanted to offer visitors the opportunity to take photographs when exploring my installations. With this project, I wanted to focus on those moments when a person instructs another how to pose. This often leads to comical situations.

WHAT ARE YOUR SOURCES OF INSPIRATION?

In general, I remain very instinctive and naive, with little concern for the style or where the project can lead. But the origin of my work is often found in memories or objects that I engaged with during my childhood. I like to relive moments, leaving as much room as possible for users, the environment and other elements to influence the scenario. My work relies heavily on random variables and although I always give a few clues, I never know exactly what will happen. The user must experiment with it. As such, my daughters are inexhaustible sources of inspiration. They help me take a childish look at my projects. They are also excellent "crash testers" as they are not impressed by anything. All this seems rather normal to them. It is always good to have this type of critical opinion, it allows me to always go further.

WHAT TYPES OF SKILLS ARE INVOLVED IN PROJECTS LIKE YOURS?

When I started, I wanted to do everything myself and I loved being alone for hours deciphering complex programs. I have gradually realised that, once the prototypes are created, it is better to collaborate with specialists to finalize the projects. Sometimes I work for prestigious clients, I create monumental or highly technical installations and I must be able to rely on experts to add the finishing touches: electricians, carpenters,
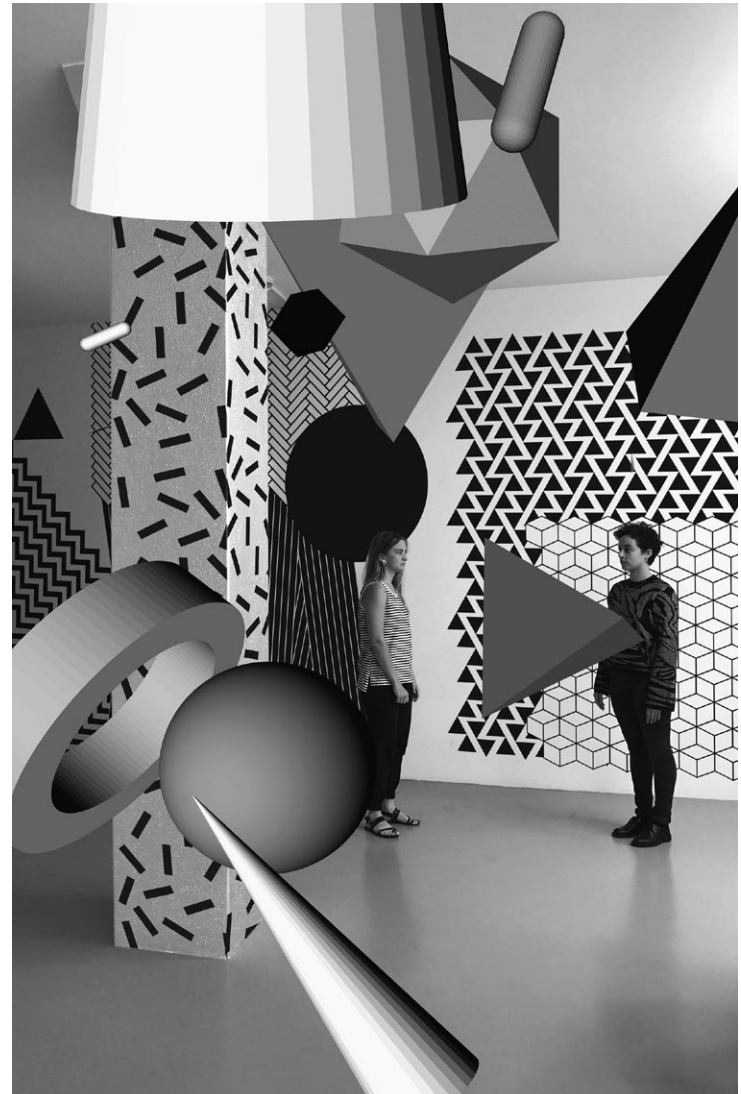
Dings & Floats, 2017

developers, etc. This allows me to collaborate with very diverse and, in some cases, very unusual trades. For example, I worked with roofers in the Pays-d'Enhaut and an automatician specialising in the restoration of Jean Tinguely's works. These professions require as much skill as it is needed to operate a Kinect sensor! (Editor's note: a device equipped with a camera capable of controlling an interface without a joystick.)

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOUR TEACHING ACTIVITIES INFLUENCE YOUR WORK?

Students are always on the lookout for new developments and teaching is a very good way to keep up with the rapid evolution of advanced technologies. All this is very intriguing but I don't think it is necessary to know all about the latest technology. After all these years of experiments, I realised that it is possible to have a fairly accurate idea of what I can do with my skill set. What I particularly like in teaching is the possibility of developing a programme that is fully in line with my work. For example, projects carried out in interactive design are generally intended to be shown on screens. In my classes, I try to get students to find substitutes and they have to imagine interactive models without a screen. The results are often very hybrid. From tree bark to bedside tables, their projects often incorporate organic and unexpected elements. One always tends to be impressed by the spectacular capacity of machines, but this is not really where the priority should be. Technology should always be used with caution. With my students, we often do exercises in which they are invited to talk about their grandfather's job or find out their temperature at birth. In this way, I try to sensitise them to all kinds of small elements that are specifically human.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, DO YOU THINK IT IS POSSIBLE TO PREDICT THE FUTURE OF AUGMENTED REALITY?

Ten years ago, augmented reality entered the market with a bang but at the moment it seems to be treading water. Perhaps because the effect of surprise has passed, when everyone was impressed by the features offered by this new technology. Today it is more difficult to find truly innovative applications and I view augmented reality as a tool like any other, without paying too much attention to future applications. I have been invited by companies such as Logitech and Penguin Books publishers to reflect on the evolution of augmented reality in relation to publishing and computing. After research and analysis, we always concluded that people were not quite ready to accept the intrusion of the virtual into their daily lives. The Pokémon Go phenomenon, which uses similar technology, gives us food for thought, especially because you are physically involved in the game. In general, there are few examples of commercial applications that really stand out. The multiplication of tools will probably be exponential, it is an unlimited field. It is impossible to predict the future and I prefer to remain as flexible as possible in my approach to my projects. One thing is certain, augmented reality works well when it is integrated into artistic projects but using it in everyday or commercial applications is still problematic.

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Le Monde des Montagnes, 2008