

Cédric Noël

Too many rooms, too many views at the Eden Hotel looks at the relationship between a particular place, the Sécheron neighborhood in Geneva, and the project to create an artificial intelligence at a biotechnology campus located within this area. This cutting-edge scientific research, called the Human Brain Project, constitutes the heart, if you will, of the artistic research conducted by Cédric Noël. Although the artist initiated this project, it was nevertheless envisioned to be an interdisciplinary, collective exercise. As its subtitle indicates, these were in fact “intersecting perspectives,” a kaleidoscopic vision on the relationship between this ecosystem and an artificial life. Originally, the project sought to bring together the perspectives of seven researchers: Raymond Balau, Anaïs Chabeur, Laure Cottin Stefanelli, Pauline Hatzigeorgiou (in replacement of Benoît Dusart), Mira Sanders, Joachim Olender, and Cédric Noël himself, whose respective competencies in the domains of architecture, art, and publishing, among others, would help describe this complex reality.

The first part of the research examined and critiqued depictions of our relationship to AI. Through workshops organized at La Cambre and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts (ArBA), students analyzed images, looked for typologies, and examined the narratives surrounding the existence of a synthetic brain in films, on the Internet, in the media, in scientific publications, and elsewhere. The second part was rooted in the urban space. It is based on the Hotel Eden in Geneva, which gave its name to the project. For Cédric Noël, its location facing the campus represented a privileged site for conducting his inquiry, both in terms of its distanced perspective, and as a microcosm that served as a metonymy for the cerebral project next door. The project *Too many rooms...* bore the full brunt of the consequences of the healthcare crisis. Its collective side was quickly quashed by everyone’s forced isolation. The inspiration from the on-site contact and the research of the area were rendered impossible by the prohibition of travel. The necessary spontaneity was discouraged by the ensuing uncertainties, and the hope of meeting and interviewing campus scientists on site was dashed by the fact that everyone began working from home.

Too Many Rooms, Too Many Views at the Eden Hotel

Despite these obstacles, the artists were able to participate in the exhibition *Risquons-Tout* [Let’s Risk Everything] at Wiels in 2020-2021, during which they presented a version of their research in the form of a virtual architecture designed in collaboration with Fieldstation Studio; this enabled a visualization of all the documents collected until that point. This data set will soon be published in book form or made into a film directed by Cédric Noël and Mira Sanders.

(A/R) The project was conceived at your initiative, but it strove for a collective, or at least a collaborative form. How did you surround yourself?

(C.N.) This is a collective of friends, acquaintances, and people with various kinds of expertise that this multi-layered project needs. In fact, when I was conceiving the project, I realized fairly quickly that I wanted to address a number of things: the scientific dimension (the digital translation of a human brain), urban planning (Geneva, its surrounding area, its networks), the philosophical and historical aspect (the question of artificiality and the art-historical references), geopolitics, and so on. There was something invigorating about this subject, but it was also somewhat of a Pandora’s box: once opened, a lot of things flew out that were hard to grasp. I didn’t want to get lost in that. I wasn’t willing to spend ten years on this. So, I looked for this expertise all around me. Just as FRArt presupposes a relationship to an art school, I looked around among my colleagues at the La Cambre visual arts school. I made a proposal to Raymond Balau, who had worked with me in the urban space workshop and who writes about architecture. I contacted Joachim Olender, a filmmaker I know very well and with whom I had wanted to work. He works a lot on the nature of images, not just the cinematographic image, but also the virtual image, digitalization, and the like—and all that with a solid literary and philosophical background. Then there is Mira Sanders, an artist I have worked with for a long time. She has lots of experience in the public space, with graphic depictions of forms and information. I found her sensibility of spaces, her capacity to produce poetic translations of the terrain very moving.

Intersecting Perspectives on a Territory Permeated with the Manufacturing of a Brain

I invited Anaïs Chabeur, a former student and visual artist, to contribute her take on the phenomena of apparitions, ghosts, and feminism. Laure Cottin Stefanelli also joined us. Her work is about the limits of the body or between bodies. Benoît Dusart, exhibition curator and art critic, had committed to the project, but he ultimately didn’t work with us because of his schedule, and so, Pauline Hatzigeorgiou took his place. She brought her experience as an art historian and her knowledge of the art of systems.

(A/R) Despite the project’s collaborative dimension, things really began a *quattro mani* with Mira Sanders, in an initial, fairly theoretical phase, especially in the library.

(C.N.) Yes, the idea was to not summon the group right away, but to clear the ground first. Mira and I worked on the issues of depicting artificial intelligence, or AI. I thought we should first explore and get rid of a whole set of clichés. In collecting documentation before I wrote up the project, I noticed early on that the illustrations in scientific articles emulated cinematographic situations from *Blade Runner* and *Terminator*—things of that sort. Or synthetic images of the brain that were enticing, hyper-colorful, and luminous. All of these images were problematic and I wanted to get rid of that. So, we envisioned a workshop format with students at La Cambre and the Royal Fine Arts Academy (ArBA) where we put the two schools in touch. We analyzed images, and we specifically studied how certain kinds of research communicate about AI issues to the public. We found a set of typologies, forms, and recurrences. Students were able to grasp these images and the notions that remained hidden behind them. There were a few performance extrapolations as well.

(A/R) How did you collect the images?
On an intuitive basis, each person bringing their own representations?

(C.N.) Yes, something of that sort. The workshops were rather brief, actually. We wanted to form a collective repertory of representations of artificial intelligence, going online or to the library (basically to the ULB) to consult scientific articles. In the end, we published a series of posters based on associations of images. We also produced an edition. We were supposed to distribute it,

but then Covid hit... It's still in boxes at the ArBA. We communicated this research on the presentation of AI in the media to the group, specifically during a day-long seminar at the Bac Art Lab in Leuven in December 2019.

(A/R) The project title is inspired by a real place, the Hotel Eden, which is right across from the Biotech campus where the Human Brain Project (HBP) was developed. How did you find out about this hotel, and what drew you to it?

(C.N.) I discovered the hotel via remote, wandering around on Google Street View. I had explored a lot of the surroundings of the Biotech Campus, the Sécheron neighborhood in Geneva, Geneva as a whole and its surroundings. The hotel showed up during this period when we were looking for things. We weren't sure what, but we were looking. In ambling around the campus, I often ended up at this hotel. I was obsessing about something, and obviously, it was the name. The association between the name and the research topic was potentially useful in a number of ways. First of all, the term has potential. It's barely used, as far as I know (except for hotels, spas, and the like), and one can only vaguely guess what it is referring to. There is this Biblical aspect that is cleaned up, at the same time superior. I was also interested in the hotel's association with the collective and the residence project planned with the research group. The hotel was a place that welcomed people. I focused on this place, because when we started our research, I didn't know whether or not we would be granted access to the laboratories. It was a kind of fallback in case we were refused, a way to be able to work, no matter what. And everything around it, in and around the Sécheron neighborhood, began to pique my curiosity: references to Paul Otlet, Mary Shelley, Le Corbusier, John Milton, Robert Cailliau, Jorge Luis Borges, and others. I could detect stories of artificiality and the mind that were firmly rooted in this place. Actually, this backup plan ended creating a lot of connections. It provided me with a kind of reassurance when I approached the people at the laboratory.

(A/R) So, whom did you approach? The Human Brain Project as a whole, or certain individual scientists?

(C.N.) I first contacted their communications office. The response was slow in coming, but it was a "yes," and it finally showed up. Actually, when we did our first scout with Anaïs Chabeur, we didn't have permission yet. It was only at the Brussels airport that I received an email confirming that we were welcome to come... I guess I was talking to the wrong person at the beginning. The Human Brain Project is financed with European public money. It's part of their job to provide information about what they're doing. It's also true that, because of the grant from FRArt and the support of the FNRS, it was a lot easier to convince them to meet with us.

We didn't know whether they would let us visit the premises, but they saw that we were serious and well-informed about what they did. So, in the end, we were able to talk to a lot of people and we were given badges, so we could come and go as we pleased.

(A/R) What did you do in these buildings?

Did you interview people or take photographs and record the premises?

(C.N.) We met people, collected information, checked to see whether ours was correct, scouted the place, and thought about the technology of translating the biological to the digital. We were ready. We had a good rapport and we had prepared our questions. of self-consciousness in a simulation? We had planned all of this preparatory work precisely so that we could go back to them and conduct interviews with the right materials. We made one last preparatory trip in February 2020, right before we were all asked to stay at home until further notice...

(A/R) What kind of meetings and observations did you end up with?

(C.N.) We met a lot of the scientists. We were able to observe their working methods and equipment, and we were able to ask them substantive questions. They were interested in our questions and our view of things. They got to meet people who gave them a different perspective on what they were doing. They were very enthusiastic. We told them early on that their work would interest artists and we asked them why they hadn't placed artists in their labs. There are already graphic designers, people who work on representation using reference points that we had discovered during the first phase of our research, science fiction movies, video games, and the like. Actually, the person in charge of modeling had worked on *Toy Story*! As artists and writers, it felt totally normal for us to be there. We brought different references to bear, a multidisciplinary approach. We met the Campus Director, a writer and a fan of graphic novels. It was pretty funny actually, because everyone started telling us about their interest in the visual arts, cinema, architecture, music, and so on. We also met the Co-Director of the Blue Brain Project, Felix Schürmann, who came in just to meet with us for an entire morning. He gave us a long presentation that was just great. He seemed interested in our presence and the opportunities that we were offering to open up their research to the world of art.

(A/R) What new possibilities or realizations did you walk away with after this first phase, despite the fact that it was interrupted?

(C.N.) We probably have to go back to the source of the project. The Human Brain Project came out of the Blue Brain Project, a Swiss project envisioned by Henry Markram, who is

considered a genius by some of his colleagues. The goal of this project was to map and simulate the brains of a rat and of a mouse, which they did do. The HBP was one of the two FET Flagships, one of the leading European research projects supported by the EU to the tune of one billion euros over ten years. The stated goal was to map and simulate the human brain using a supercomputer. Critics appeared quickly within the scientific community, questioning the feasibility and scientific interest, which was fair. Markram was removed from his position and the HBP was subdivided into a set of brain-oriented research categories. The simulation of the human brain is still on the program, but it has been put on the backburner for now. The rat works. We watched it. It has a digital body, like in a video game. You see a modeled rat that moves around in an environment. When its whiskers or paws touch something, you can see a series of signals activate in its brain. What interested me was the reverse engineering, the mechanisms for understanding life, coding, writing life, and so on. How do you translate the biological into the digital? It took a long time to understand how a program imitates a neuron. All of this led us to make an important discovery in terms of territory. Scientists in biotech laboratories work on small parts of the brain, but the supercomputer is in Lugano. We were told that there was an underground cable that ran from Geneva to there, where there was a large calculation center with all the supercomputers that Switzerland manages to hold. We were just fascinated by this cabling of the territory. Hardware stretching out over hundreds of kilometers. It evoked this abstract notion of the world brain. And this is something I want to explore: traveling from Geneva to Lugano.

(A/R) In that case, you're going to have to leave the Hotel Eden...

(C.N.) Yes. The Hotel Eden still exists as a research support, but we all knew that we would leave one day. It was a kind of base, a shared subject. I never thought it would remain as such. That would contradict the sense of the unexpected that is inherent to research. You begin somewhere and then, you move on.

(A/R) What part of the research was conducted in the hotel itself?

(C.N.) We had a few meetings, but those were aborted. The director very generously welcomed us. We had a very good rapport. He was thrilled that we took an interest in his hotel. He gave us carte blanche to take photos, film, etc. We had a hard time locating historical information about the hotel, so we planned on interviewing the former director, but we weren't able to pull that off. But we were able to do a paper modeling of the hotel and of the HBP; this was an extremely precise model that we made in collaboration with the architect Jolien De Nijs. It was exhibited as part of the exhibition *Risquons-Tout* ("Let's risk everything"), which ran from September 2020 to March 2021.

(A/R) What did the presentation at the Wiels contemporary arts center consist of?
 (C.N.) We decided to work on three areas. In the first one, each participant showed their working documents. The research was still only halfway done. Because the group included several visual artists, we already had forms, images, sounds, the model, and other things as well. We made a selection that focused on the coincidences. The second part concerned the research buried in our computers: references, photographs of the site, and more. We worked with the two architects that make up Fieldstation Studio, whom we asked to help us develop a kind of architecture for this mass of invisible documents in our computers. We developed a kind of “low-tech intelligence” by creating “rooms” (in reference to the hotel), themes, and so on. We still have to push this forward, especially in terms of the images. There was something contemplative about this software, an archive in motion; it was quite beautiful. But above all, we discovered new associations between the documents. This helped us think about the next steps. I am also thinking about a book of photographs based on the production of this IT system. I discovered new associations between some of my own images. And finally, the third part was discursive. We invited several people: Nicolas Antille, a biomedical engineer who worked at the HBP, Milad Doueihy, a researcher and historian of religion, who calls himself a “digital person by accident,” the artist Claire Malrieux, our friends Fieldstation Studio, the anthropologist Emmanuel Grimaud, and Marie Lisel, a hypnotist. These discursive forms had to be deployed in space and the archives had to generate a dynamic; they had to be shown and discussed. But because of the Covid measures, we couldn’t do this the way we wanted to.
 (A/R) What was the collective up to during the preparation of the exhibition?
 (C.N.) Everyone was there, even if Raymond Balau had begun to pull back somewhat. He had stepped away because he wasn’t

interested in the public forms, but he kept on working on his own. It was after the experience at Wiels that the collective split up. The exhibition lasted a long time. The round tables were held over a period of several months, but because of the health situation, we were only able to hold two of them in person. Otherwise it was everyone by themselves at home, behind a computer. I think this experience left us all exhausted. We were missing being in one another’s presence, interacting with one another. And the research was supposed to be completed within one year’s time. I decided to extend it, but it was hard to restart the process. Everyone had committed for a year and then, they obviously started to drift off in other directions.
 (A/R) You talked about aborted or delayed meetings. What impact did the pandemic have on the research project as a whole and in the long-term?
 (C.N.) Covid really blew up the project matrix as we had conceived it. It was and still is very frustrating, because we weren’t able to do a lot of things, to complete a lot of them. This created a general climate of stress. We kept having to reshape the project to adapt to new possibilities, or rather, impossibilities. The main impossibility was going to Geneva, which was the essence of the project. The FRArt budget consisted mainly of covering our travel and lodging costs, of going places to make as many observations on site as possible, to come face to face with a scientific project, a network. To consider associations in person that I had only imagined at a distance. This part of the work fell apart. We did go to Geneva in the first five months, though. We met a lot of people and we had already amassed a lot of preparatory material to share. And this invitation to Wiels allowed us, once Covid hit, to spend time analyzing this preparatory material. Which we wouldn’t have been able to do if we had remained within the process. But it was hard to bounce back after the experience at Wiels. The health situation

hadn’t changed all that much, in the end. Yes, we could once again travel, with the restrictions that we still face, but there was no longer anything waiting for us in Geneva. Among the Human Brain Project staff, all the scientists have been working at home ever since. There was no one left in the laboratories. The terrain and all its potential just dried up. It should also be said that the research had its technical side, but that there was a “festive” aspect of our going to Geneva with all our enthusiasm to deal with this material collectively. It’s really frustrating. There was lots of energy, excellent meetings, potential, the very important support from FRArt, comfort, trust, and more. Having so many means at one’s disposal and to be disrupted like this is just pathetic.

(A/R) In addition to the exhibition at Wiels, did you think of other ways of presenting the research to the public?
 (C.N.) After Wiels, we talked about it and we said that we would work on a publication, that we would use our initial impressions and thoughts as a first point of takeoff. That’s where we left off...
 (A/R) Have you ever imagined doing this publication project by yourself?
 (C.N.) Yes, that’s where I am these days, actually. I think I have to let go of things and start over with my own personal projects. For starters, on a photography book, a project about urban space. And then, together with Mira, on a film project, a fictional story set around this journey from Geneva to Lugano. It’s important that we take this trip. Things are still very open-ended.

CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 Interview opening page: The Eden hotel and the Campus Biotech in Geneva, 2019. Photo credit: Cédric Noël.
- fig. 02 Scouting at Campus Biotech, 2019. Photo credit: Anaïs Chabeur.
- fig. 03 “Eden Studies”, Open school, as part of *Risquons-tout*, Wiels, 2020. Photo credit: Laure Cottin Stefanelli.
- fig. 04 Mira Sanders, *Tagging reflections on a scenography Eden Studies*, mixed media, 29,7 x 21 cm, 2020.
- fig. 05 “Entering the Eden Hotel” seminar at Bac Art Lab, Leuven, 2020. Photo credit: Mira Sanders.