



CULTURE

The XX factor

Montreal artist-run studio seeks to open cyberspace to women

By Sheehan Moore

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When Paulina Abarca-Cantin talks about how busy she's been lately, there is no trace of the mokey, late-winter woe felt all over campus. In fact, Abarca-Cantin is positively glowing as she describes "some of the most exciting months ever" for Studio XX, the Plateau-Mont-Royal art space she has directed since 2007.

Studio XX was founded in 1996 by four friends – cybertheorist Sheryl Hamilton, filmmaker Patricia Kearns, sound artist Kathy Kennedy, and Concordia media professor Kim Sawchuck – to serve a mandate unique in Canada and probably the world. They envisioned the studio as a bilingual feminist digital art centre which would highlight "the territories, perspectives, and creative actions of women in cyberspace," while demystifying and deconstructing digital technologies through critical examination, according to the XX web site. The studio is "a space for women, in particular, to feel comfortable with technology – to get their hands dirty," Abarca-Cantin explained.

Studio XX shares a building at 4001 Berri with several other artistic initiatives, and its set-up is what you might imagine a digital art studio to look like: workrooms lined with Macs and audiovisual equipment; wood-floored exhibition spaces; a small but functional theatre. But the studio's creative ambition far exceeds its physical boundaries. Between artist presentations, projects, and public workshops for women on everything from 3D modelling to web programming, the team behind XX are constantly on the move, evolving almost as fast as the technology that plays such a central role in the studio.

Abarca-Cantin maintains the importance of making a space like this available for women, citing the varying needs of different genders. "It's a bit like math," she says. "We learn in different ways." She perceives social obstacles between women and technology, too, and in particular points to elderly women who, on entering a computer store, may "be told by salespeople, 'Oh, you need this [product] for safety.' But [these women] can make a huge impact on the market." Discrimination can start at home, too. "Families aren't as comfortable paying the \$10,000 tab every year for their daughter to go and study game design and 3D animation and be a gamer," Abarca-Cantin noted.

The studio's most regular features are their Salons Femmes br@nchées, monthly show-and-tells that bring together new-media artists and enthusiasts from Montreal and beyond to present their work, in the process engaging each other and their audience in discussing new technologies. Recent salons have featured photographers, choreographers, and graphic artists who, by incorporating these technologies into their projects, have created intensely personal art with a level of interactivity previously unachievable. Last month's "Celldance" presentation, for instance, demonstrated the potential for camera choreography to complement human dancers.

In addition to these salons, Studio XX has partnered with the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in creating the First Person Digital project, aimed at developing emerging female talent. The studio received over 60 submissions for the project, to be narrowed down in the coming weeks to the six best proposals. These teams will collaborate over the next few months with Studio XX and the NFB, building partnerships with artists and tech experts to develop new approaches to multimedia storytelling. Their final products will be presented in November at the studio's biannual HTMLles exposition, along with pieces from Digital Ludology – XX's video game art project – and works that Abarca-Cantin calls "some of the best and most exciting" released over the last two years.

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Quebec artist audrey samson was living in Rotterdam, the Netherlands when she first heard about Studio XX from a friend. “If you go back to Montreal, you should check this place out,” he told her. “It’s right up your alley.” Now samson is wrapping up a two-month residency with XX and preparing to present her latest work, “threads/,” this Friday at Compagnie F.

samson’s position is one of three eight-week residencies available at Studio XX, which include full studio access, work space, a modest stipend, workshop participation, and tech support valued at \$1,125. Previous artist-in-residence Magali Babin describes “a sense of trust between [her] and the studio” that quickly developed during her residency.

samson has reaped benefits from her time at the studio, too. “There are always people working here, and you can always ask them questions and see what they’re working on,” she said. It also means access to presentations and exhibits she might “never be able to see otherwise.”

Her “threads/” project is a digital art installation with two interfaces, one physical and one virtual. In the gallery space, it takes the shape of an antique sewing machine table, complete with the original pedal. But where the machine would normally sit rests a computer keyboard, whose buttons control sewing machine sounds that are piped through the piece’s speakers. The pedal then acts as a crossfader which, when moved up and down, interweaves the sounds of the sewing machine with recordings of women discussing their relationship with technology. Online, the physical controls of samson’s installation are replaced by clickable images pulled from a Google search for “women and technology.”

samson had already completed a large portion of “threads/” when she came to the studio, but over these two months she has been able to “totally, entirely change it.” In part, this means women can now record their stories directly into the piece from the gallery space.

More drastically, though, samson has completely reprogrammed her piece. “The whole back end used to be built with proprietary software,” she said, but she’s used her time at XX to rewrite “threads/” using FLOSS – free/libre open source software – which encourages collaborative public development of the source code and makes licenses liberally available.

Championing the use of FLOSS is one of Studio XX’s core objectives, and it’s also something samson believes in personally. “Ideologically speaking, it’s important to own the tools you’re working with,” she said. FLOSS has its practical implications for samson as well. Buying new software licenses for every new computer gets expensive, and for workshop students, “Telling people they have to buy \$800 software to take your class...that’s not very accessible.” Accessibility and opportunity are ideals at the heart of Studio XX, which samson describes as a place “for women to come learn, but also to gain exposure and to work.”

samson is more hesitant than Abarca-Cantin to talk about specific hurdles facing women. She shies away from words like “barriers,” preferring to avoid terminology that may portray women as victims. There are “many types of learning,” samson says. She likes the idea of women-only classes, where she has found students “to be generally more receptive to technical knowledge” than in co-ed environments.

Both women seem to agree on the importance of “providing opportunities for women...in an area (new media/technology) where women are by far the minority,” as samson put it in an email. This is the sentiment that has kept Studio XX running strong since its creation 14 years ago – two years before Google even existed – that guided it through the dot-com bust and the rise of social networking, and that will now pull the studio into the future as its artists continue to create innovative art incorporating the latest technologies – technologies Abarca-Cantin predicts will include Apple’s new iPad. “Oh, we’d love to play around with one of those!”

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