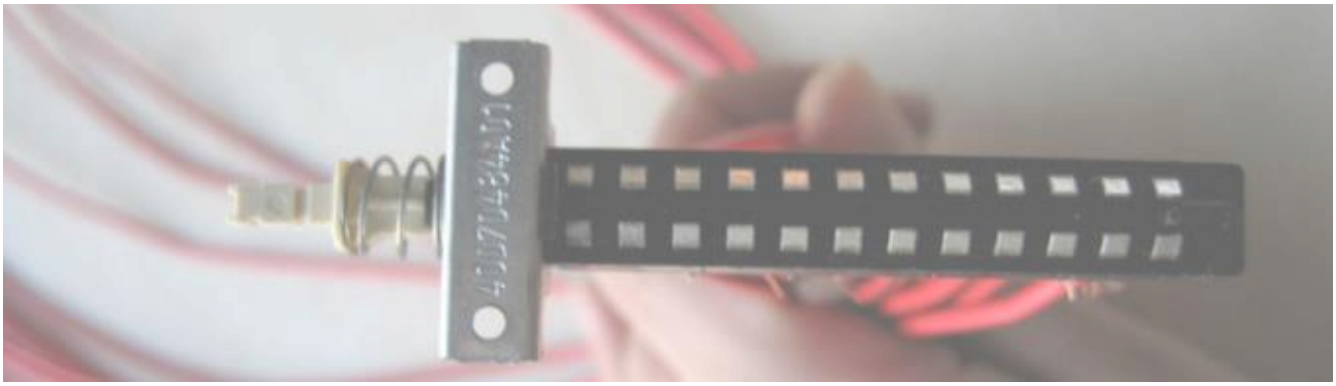
Artist statement

Blink activates the light infrastructure of a tower for poetic purposes. Its first deployment took place in 2006 at Concordia University, Montréal, at/on the EV building (Engineering, Computer Science and Visual Arts Integrated Complex). State-of-the art sensors form part of the 17-storey building's light, heat and security ecosystem. This interactive performance explored the infrastructure's potential when diverted from its functional vocation. Specifically, Blink created conditions for the lights to leave the main choreography and start pacing at another tempo.



We modified the electrical circuit to control the lights of an entire floor from a single switch (shown above). We then posted a participant (recruited from people who worked, studied or researched in the facility) on each floor and provided her with a live feed of the view from the street. The live feed allowed participants to coordinate their actions and create a pattern across floors. But the feed was filtered (using contextual masks) such that participants only saw neighboring floors. We aimed to recreate the conditions for swarm intelligence, a naturally occurring phenomenon whereby agents adjust their behavior in relation to their neighbor's. Bird flocks and ants colonies coordinate through such strategy, with neither the leading bird nor the queen ant actually leading. Speed and direction of the birds and ant paths result from horizontal decisions, each agent adjusting to its relative environment.

Similarly, Blink has no central leader. Participants refer to neighbors in order to decide the state of their floor. But contrary to swarm intelligence (and cellular automata) models, the state of the neighboring floors (i.e. lit or dark) does not necessarily determine the participant's decision. Surrounding tempo is simply context against which a participant determines her own rhythm. After beta testing the project, some participants spoke about their attempt to coordinate with other floors by looking at the reflection or nearby buildings. The live feed at their disposal in the final version facilitates this process, but leaves open the rules to be inferred from this information.

The notion of rhythm can be transposed to political stance (Sha Xin Wei), with each tempo marking different attitudes towards dominant discourse. 1:1 tempo maps to mainstream acceptance, counterpoint corresponds to dissent and random patterns evoke anarchy. In performing Blink, a main rhythm emerged after a few minutes of adjustment. It changed over time, with participants adjusting. Some participants sought to differentiate themselves with a counterpoint pattern. Others created a tempo that neither aligned nor opposed their immediate neighbors'. We can think of the richness of multiple rhythms not as cacophony, but as a signs of precious diversity. Perhaps cacophony itself is a rhythm, heard against the tyranny of modern simplicity.

Blink let participants decide on the building's appearance from within its membrane. Facades traditionally convey the architect's static message. Only in retrospect can the viewer interpret it differently; but fundamentally the building is always "saying the same thing". Reactive architecture affords the possibility to influence an edifice in real-time. Through this self-activation, we developed the metaphor of the surface as a liminal space that both adjusts to outside information and exteriorizes private processes.

Maroussia Lévesque