S3:E11 EXPRESSIVE INTERACTION

Daniel Iregui in conversation with Hilary Knight

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[THEME MUSIC]

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Hilary Knight: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series brought to you by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

My name is Hilary Knight, and I'm a Senior Consultant at AEA Consulting. And my guest today is Daniel Iregui. He is a Montreal-based digital artist who creates interactive sculptures, immersive spaces, and architectural interventions using technology as both a tool and an aesthetic.

Daniel founded the digital art studio, Studio Iregular, in 2010. Studio Iregular creates audio visual installations, large scale sculptures, architectural projections, and scenographies with a focus on interactive and immersive experiences. At the crossroads between art and technology, their works experiment with light, sound, and typography using mathematics, algorithms, AI, and machine learning.

So welcome, Daniel. It's really great to be speaking to you today.

[00:01:15]
Daniel Iregui: Hi, Hilary. Thank you so much. I'm very excited to be here.

[00:01:18]
Hilary Knight: Now, we met earlier this year in Montreal and I was really lucky enough to have a quick tour of your studio. And I'm looking forward to hearing more about your work and your practice, cause it was a very quick meeting. But, I generally, like to start at the start and I love a good origin tale.

So I was wondering if you could tell us how did you get here?

[00:01:39]
Daniel Iregui: Yeah, for sure. So I'm originally from Colombia, and I've been living in Canada for 20 years, and I'm 41. So last year I started to become more Canadian. That's something that I tend to say because it's sort of gives a bit of context to my life.

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[00:01:54]
Daniel Iregui: I started my studies in Colombia, and in Colombia there's not a lot of things that you can study if you're into creative stuff.

So there's either graphic design, art, let's say music, but I really was not considering this at the moment, or advertising – and advertising is what now in Canada, they will call like creative media. So it was that place where I was interested in video, I was interested in graphic design. I was interested in writing. So that was the place for me.

So I studied three years and a half in Bogotá, and then we immigrated, all my family to Toronto. And I didn't know anything about the world.

So I was, okay, sure. Let's go for advertising as well. I'll just transfer all my credits. And none of them were transferred. It was not compatible at all because advertising in Canada, it was very technical, whether it's statistics and market research, and basically not the advertising that I was used to in Colombia, where it's super creative about the concept about creating stuff.

And in Colombia I was more of a copywriter. But here, when I arrived to Canada because of the language, I went into art direction.

And I sort of quickly started to realise that it was not my thing. And I decided to apply for interactive multimedia. The reason was, I wanted to learn Flash at the time, was sort of my thing. Flash animation. Programming was not in my radar, but I thought it would be interesting because I was always interested in numbers and physics or sort of whatever I understood about programming. I was interested. And then I got into the programme, which ended up being super, super intense.

It was a one year postgraduate where it was a lot of programming, many languages and something else that I didn't realise uh, that college was an hour and a half away from my house. I didn't have the money to go and rent a studio, or an apartment close to the college. So I was commuting every day. And what happened in that commuting is that I became that, you know, that student that reads all the extra books that the teacher suggests. But, you don't need to, but if you're interested, here are the books.

[00:04:04]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, yeah. I'm impressed. I was never that student.

[00:04:08]
Daniel Iregui: (laughs) Well, me neither! In Colombia, my life, I sort of um, not that, but I had the time and I was super interested in programming. I really found myself there. Sort of that became my thing.

I'm a programmer, but of course with all my background on sort of being interested in graphics and at the time I was also interested in doing video.

So I was interested in all sort of the visual output that programming allowed me to create. And that was a sort of the beginning of me, well, sort of exploring programming.

[00:04:40]
Daniel Iregui: I graduated from that. I went, um, I got hired by a company in New York that allowed me to work remotely. So I moved to Montreal. I prefer that city. I always liked it much more, and my parents at the time were here as well. So it made all the sense.

I moved to Montreal. I started working for this company in New York. It was all about web and then I started to do games, but it was a small company and I was sort of out of school that, you know, that passion or slash, I can do everything. So I was working nonstop. And I, sort of, that's a pattern. That's my thing. I really, when I go for it, when I work on things I, I like to just work for a long time and then I rest for a long time. At the time I did this and eventually I decided to rent my own studio that I shared then later with somebody that introduced me to a company called Moment Factory which it's very big now.

At the time we were 19, now, like 500 people multimedia company based in Montreal. And I got hired to sort of develop or open their web design team or Flash design team at the time. So, I went to work for them doing websites. At the time, their clients were more artistic, cultural, so I was able to explore more experimental interfaces and menus and everything. But they were at the time developing a lot of the public space stuff. And I started to realise, that all this interactive multimedia with like in physical space using sensors, I saw that that was a job for me. I was interested at the time, I was, because I was going into conferences.

There were people using at the time, Arduinos and sensors. For me it was, oh, that's very interesting, but it's almost like, wow, it's interesting, but it's, as in my mind was, it's like having a rock band in the weekends, you know, I will do this thing, but there was zero ambitions on that might be the way that I will make my living.

But at Moment Factory, I saw this and I started to get very, like super interested on that. But I was in the web design team, so there was like a, say, like a wall between me and the other team, but I was very into that. So I was working until six and then joining them as a just curious guy, helping them with Flash to solve things.

And then, with time I decided I was not on the web aspect anymore. There was no, I didn't see a possibility for me moving. So the company didn't allow me for that. There was just politics involved that I couldn't jump into the other place. So I decided to stop working for them, become a freelancer.

And then a year after I started Iregular, which at the time was uh, well, I was again in super interested in public space and doing interactive installations, but I was getting a lot of web design clients. But I'm a bit intense with things. I was calling every festival in Montreal to allow me to create, to present something, something that was not created, that I could not show them because I had no portfolio, but eventually, somebody agreed to present this thing that I was trying to explain on the phone. And that was my first one.

And then I realised that, well, I confirmed that was my interest and it had to be with sort of bringing everything that I was able to do with on the websites or sort of putting together graphic designs and motion design and typography and everything, but you put it in a physical space.

[00:08:17]
Daniel Iregui: And the most interesting thing for me was being able to see the reaction of people live. Before, doing websites, polishing and then hoping somebody will see it and hoping that the person that saw it will give me feedback or a comment or anything. It was very – me in my house waiting for a message. Now I see myself in a public space looking at people reacting to my work. And that's where I just confirmed this is my thing. I'm going to do everything I can to just continue working on this. So, um, yeah, well, it took me a bit of years to really get rid of all the web and all the client stuff and really work on my own on the interactive public space projects that I was interested on.

And I think it was around 2015, 2016 that I was able to just stop everything that was not digital art. Just many things happen, but now that I'm dedicated to that, I've been just working on projects and I'm being super lucky that all those projects that I create end up in many cities around the world.

So I'm able to connect with people and see the reactions of people, but from cultures and places and countries that I never dreamed of being. So, yeah, that's where everything started.

[00:09:37]
Hilary Knight: I love that. It's always really interesting to me when you hear how people got where they are today, because especially when people have started somewhere quite different to where they've ended up, because there's always a thread. But I'm also really interested in what you're saying about being able to see live reactions versus when you're coding for the web.

And you know, you, the reactions come through as data points. You don't see the human being's immediate response. And I think it's on your website where you say that the relationship between the people and the piece finalises the artwork.

Can you say a little bit more about that?

[00:10:14]
Daniel Iregui: Yeah, the way that we describe our work is that we always deliver unfinished projects that the audience finishes with their interaction. That's how I really see the work. There's many things that I delegate to random functions inside the code that we write.

You know, when you do graphic design, you're always like, which one? What option is better? Should I put it here, or should I put it here? Should I centre it? Where should I put it? But when we create our work, as long as we like both options, we don't set, we just randomise. Sometimes it's one, sometimes it's the other. And that's amazing. That feeling of just, I don't need to commit to many things.

And then we put another random system, which is people, into the whole mix and then they finish the you know, whatever happens to the piece – how the piece looks and how the piece behaves, how the piece sounds, it's really up to the person that it's interacting. But that means for us that the interaction between the people and the piece needs to be what we call expressive interaction, meaning you're really in control.

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[00:11:23]
Daniel Iregui: You understand there's a bit of a curve to understand what is it that you're doing, but you become good at it. It's like an instrument that you learn and our challenge is that learning curve is like the shortest as possible, but you become good at it. And then at that point, you are in control and at that point is you're finishing the piece.

The piece is that. The piece is you, are interacting with something that we created and you're creating that new thing that is unique to you and that the probability of that happening, that whatever we're looking at, however that it's sounding at the moment, it's just almost impossible, just statistically impossible.

Let's say, if we just take all those parameters and calculate the amount of combinations, it will be almost impossible to see it again.

[00:12:11]
Hilary Knight: What I really like about that, as well as the randomness and the impossibility of being able to see something again, is that you're kind of enabling your audiences to become pros very quickly, to become really skilful with your works and understand them really quickly, which is that they're very sort of in a web design space, you'd call it low friction. You're not giving them a big learning curve.

In your practice, in terms of when you're creating a work, are you testing with audiences so that you understand how people might respond, or is that mystery of how people will engage with it part of the creation?

[00:12:46]
Daniel Iregui: No, no, we test lot because I really believe that the piece is completed with the audience interacting. When there's not, when somebody doesn't get it, when people don't get it and they don't interact, the pieces for me has no... it failed.

Hilary Knight: Yeah.

Daniel Iregui: But you can never really run a test that it's real because you know, whoever, you know, you might, your friends or you, you bring your team to, to try it. They already have an expectation. They already know sort of how things work, or you do a party and it's your friends that come or it's somebody that knows your work a little bit. So there's always something that it's not a pure sort of the pedestrian on the street that has never seen your work and has never even seen an interactive work in their life. So, the way that we try to do that is that the first exhibitions that we do, they're almost prototypes.

And so there's no way to emulate 50 people in front of a facade interacting with no, we, we wouldn't have the, the scale to do it. It doesn't work. So we try to do real tests and now we think that it's more like three exhibitions that takes us there to really feel this piece doesn't need more work. We cannot say it's finished because the concept is it's never finished. The audience finished it, but our work is done. Um, that conclusion of three happened with a piece that we're actually currently presenting in here in la SAT here in Montreal. That piece for me, I look at it and I really feel we are done with it.

[00:14:17]
Daniel Iregui: We can present it everywhere and we don't need to change anything. Before, it's always worth taking notes: This is not clear. People disengage here. This one, it's interaction is not clear. How can we improve it? What I love, just the challenge of engaging people, especially in public space.

I love that challenge a lot because there's two things that happen. There's the technical challenge of how is it that you're going to make sure to track people accurately in public space, where there's you know, the light is changing, and there's rain, and fog, and snow, et cetera. So that technical challenge is amazing.

But the second one is, people have no patience. Somebody gives it a try, if the thing doesn't work, in three seconds, they're gone. They're finished. I love that challenge. It's sort of how can I convince you to drop your phone, put your phone in your pocket and look at this low resolution screen for at least five minutes or how can I convince you to just arrive a little bit later to wherever you're going?

What can we make you look or how does this sound, so that it makes you so curious that you decide to stop. And then once you do, once you try to interact, you decide, okay, I decided I'm going to stop and I'm going to interact with this, then it's worth it, no? You don't regret it. You're not like, oh my god, okay, I'm going to run again. This was a bad decision. It's like, okay it's clear, that you are interacting with it and then whatever happens, you are happy with it and it engages you and you, as you say – become a pro, you become good at it and then you get an experience that, you know, it's, it was worth your time and your attention.

[00:16:05]
Hilary Knight: And it's great to hear that it takes a few sort of exhibitions to, to get that right and that kind of spirit of working in public and showing your work. It's that kind of classic Austin Kleon's statement 'share your work', which is quite different to what happens elsewhere in exhibitions, in other parts of cultural sector where something has to be perfect before it's unveiled, but it's a very kind of software development approach to test and iterate. I'm also curious about that, what you were just saying about the sort of the reward for people interacting, that it's a good experience. Because that also makes me think about play and game design.

Is play something you think about in your work?

[00:16:46]
Daniel Iregui: Yes, we always sort of think about the experience and what people are going to get out of our work. It's like layers, and the first layer being anyone should be able to understand that it's interactive and then once they're interacting, understand that they are having an influence.

So that's the first layer. It's on the surface. It's like that wow effect of, oh wow, this big wall reacts to my presence. This is magical. I wonder what technology is behind this. And then normally in that layer, people start to look for the sensor and the camera and they ask how many cameras, you know, sort of they, they go into this debate. So that's the first one. But that one is, you know, evaporates fast.

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[00:17:25]
Daniel Iregui: The wow effect is like a peak that comes down very fast. I'm like okay, then what? And then you go the next step. So well, yes, you interact, but what else is there? And so, well, with your movement, this happens. And if you do that happens. And that's where I think the play and the exploration starts to happen for you. The more curious you are, the more you try different things, you start to discover that there's a whole world of possibilities for you to just explore and just see what happens and create your own thing.

So that part is super important, and for me, all the layers are valid. Like, if somebody stops there and goes home, I'm super happy. Like, that, that was a success. But there's more people that are start to realise, well, who did this? And why is this here?

Hilary Knight: Yeah.

Daniel Iregui: So then you wonder like, well, let me, should I understand this?

But our work is very abstract. So looking at it, sometimes doesn't give you all the information. So somebody curious about answers, probably goes and reads what the piece is about, or the name of the piece. And then they look at our studio. Uh, so they start to dig in, they start to find meaning on everything.

So there's another layer. And of course, if we get there, it's like, wow even greater. Like somebody, say, sort of is curious about this. So that's great. And then the last one is really when we are able to, when you walk away and you remember the piece, you talk about it, or you know, you think about it for a little bit.

Hopefully you're reflecting on the subject, you're reflecting on the emotions you had, reflecting about, you know, other things. Your city, the people that you share the experience with. I really think that because we put things in public spaces, I think it makes people look at the space again. So all those layers, you know, if we are able to get to all of them, it's great. But when somebody sees something and they're not curious enough, it's okay. Not everybody has the patience or the curiosity to get close to something and touch it.

But I think the big failure is they try to interact and it doesn't work or they think it worked. That one is like, failed. But then from that point on, that's the part that we, I think we work a lot. We put a lot of energy and we put a lot of energy on how to make the instructions not be textual.

How can the work itself allow you to discover on your own what is it that you need to do. That's like a big, big challenge.

Hilary Knight: Yeah, so that it becomes intuitive for how you engage with it.

Daniel Iregui: Yes, and then you discover it, um, there's no right or wrong. It's up to you and just go, dig, move, try things. One hand, two hands, put your face, bring your friend, you know. Try everything that comes to your mind. Hopefully everything gives you some sort of result. And that trying of everything, it's the experience.

[00:20:20]
Hilary Knight: And it's that trying of everything that, sort of have a go and put your face in it and your hands in it and bring a friend over, that's also the playfulness of it because you're, as a, as an audience member, you're then playing with.

[00:20:32]
Daniel Iregui: Yes, yes, completely. For me, the perfect metaphor is you're going to a pool or a sandbox. You're going to a sandbox. There's no instructions. And people start doing castles, some people put their hands under the sand, some people, I don't know, dig, you know, there's 200 ways to interact with a sandbox.

There's no right or wrong. And everybody has fun, and everybody has their own journey. So I see it like that. It's, uh, really, you go in there and it's your world. Just go for it.

[00:21:00]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:21:07]
Hilary Knight: And I was just as thinking as well, about all of the different physical installations that you have created and thinking about your journey where we started this conversation. And the majority of them are physical, and they're in these public spaces, but you also have some online artworks.

I'm thinking about Our Common Home, for example, which is, has chapters and some of those chapters are physical. And one of them is online. And that sort of seems to be going back to your web development days in a way.

Is your approach to creating online work different to how you're approaching your physical installations? You don't have the same kind of playback response, you're not, you don't see the audiences in the same way. Do you have to start from a different place?

[00:21:53]
Daniel Iregui: Yes, well, you know, the ability to see people's reactions on that and having that connection and confirming that there's a connection or not, it's very satisfying. It's like a very nice thing to see because, you know, we put a lot of work on the things we do, and then it's great to see how people react. When you do web, well, you don't get to see that, but you are building on top of something that people already know how to use. So the mouse, or the phone, and the browser, you're building on top of something. When the other works that we do in physical space, we start from zero. People are not expecting that thing to even react. So, what we ask for from people on web, it's a bit uh, we can ask them more.

In public space, you have a short amount of time, like you have three seconds to convince people that this reacts and then three to five minutes to keep them engaged and that's it. If not they're going to go and hopefully they bring their friends or a lot of people stay looking at people interact, which is great as well. But that's the window that we have. And on web, you can extend it more. You start from something else.

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Daniel Iregui: But something that is great about web that physical doesn't have is our ability to really show the work to anyone in the world and one of the reasons that we added a virtual chapter in Our Common Home is to do that. This was uh, it was a product that we created under this sort of philosophy of creating works that talk about universal, relevant things.

We said, well, if we're going to do works that are so big that, you know, everybody's going to see, like, then what are we going to talk about? And Our Common Home talks about climate change and the environment, but from the point of view of individual decisions and how they impact of those individual decisions.

So, all our work and everything that we create, there's a lot of this idea of, how is it that we're going to have the most amount of humans interact with it? So solving how is it that we're going to tour this and how fast we can put it and how cheap we can make it work so that we can take it to as many places as possible. This is sort of the question all the time.

So when we created Our Common Home and there's like, as you said, there's four chapters there and it's like this format that we're imagining that it's, we call it a neighbourhood scale interactive exhibition. Basically, instead of just putting one piece in one place we put them in many places in the city, walking distance from each other so that you experience the city through the exhibition or the other way around. But it was so important.

It was such an important theme for us to like, that we really wanted to just share with the world that creating a virtual chapter made a lot of sense because you know, one exhibition can only be at a city at a time and while that's there, what about the other humans that we also need to, you know, we want to have them think about this theme.

So, the web chapter allows everybody in the world can interact and somehow think about and contribute to that, because in, you know, in Our Common Home, everything you do on the website feeds the chapters physically. So you're contributing to that. So in a way it's like, certain people are leaving the city where the exhibition is or experience something, but there's other people in the world sort of feeding to that and sort of, adding to the experience that the people will have physically. And uh, that's one of the beauties about web. You put a link up and everybody in the world can see it.

Hilary Knight: Yeah think it achieves scale, like the World Wide Web.

Daniel Iregui: Yes, exactly. It's like sort of suddenly the footprint of your project just becomes the world, just because it's online.

[00:25:40]
Hilary Knight: Completely. And I'm curious now, I'm just sort of moving away slightly, or maybe, we're moving away slightly from the art. You can tell me. Because I understand Iregular is an art studio, but you also develop your own proprietary technologies. So that sounds to me like you have a R&D process in the studio.

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[00:25:58]
Hilary Knight: How does that work, and what's the balance between sort of creating your works and the R&D?

[00:26:05]
Daniel Iregui: The way that I've always seen the work that we do and because now I have an amazing team that really crafts the work that we exhibit, but at the time, at some time, six years ago, I was doing everything. So I was really connected through all the process from the programming to the sensors, to outputting, installing, and then supporting, you know, I was doing all of that.

And for me, the process of programming a piece, there's so much creativity and there's so much experimentation on that. I don't feel that we have an R&D practice, and then there's the creation practice. It's, everything is R&D for me. Somehow, it's almost, I always almost see it like we are in constant R&D and then we are able, through a technology or sometimes it's not a very technological thing that happens, but there's an accidental reflection or refraction of a light that, I don't know, happened while we were looking at something else.

I feel that we just say like, okay this, whatever just happened, is a piece. Let's turn it into a piece. It's almost like a, it's a R&D, we're in constant R&D and then some things are worth putting more energy and are worth sharing with the world. Some things are not or just need more work.

So I do see a whole process about R&D. But when it comes up to what you were talking about, our own technologies, for me, that's the only way. And the creating, and I like to use the word crafting because there's creating, sometimes it's referred about just conceptual parts and then producing, it's referred about putting it together.

But crafting for me is sort of this, you know, from the architecture of the software to the graphic design and then making it happen. All that craft uh, well, it's very technical, but it's the only way that we can create and for me, I think the ability to understand the process and find opportunities in every single part of the process uh, I cannot imagine doing the work we do without understanding and really be able to influence everything. But that includes the ability for us to sort of carve out certain technologies. They're not part of the project, but they've become something that we can use in the future, like tools for many projects.

And so one specific example is a technology that we've been working for like four years called Cursor, which is long range multi-user tracking in public space. So, normally, let's say pre- the times when we're doing cursor, the technologies, all the technologies were embedded in the project. So they were part of the project.

So, for example, if we're doing whatever, a face tracking installation it will be part of the project and will work well. And then in a year we're having another face tracking piece and of course we will go into the other piece and try to get all the technologies from there and copy paste as much as possible. But it was a very hard process because then in the new, in the second piece you discover 200 things about face tracking and then you, it'll be very hard to go back and install those into, in the piece that you did before. It was not making sense.

[00:29:12]
Daniel Iregui: So what made sense is to start understanding what tools, when we're creating a piece – what tools, we will be able to use in the future? What will be interesting? So, instead of embedding the technologies in the project themselves, we will just carve out the technology and work on the technology separately from the project, and that's Cursor.

So Cursor is a software that the only job is to acquire the image of cameras in public space, process those images with the artificial intelligence models, and then output data, whatever the data we want. So, me, position of bodies, hands, faces, whatever. And then the piece will use the data to do whatever the piece had to do. So, we do that and that's sort of the way that we think now and the cool thing is that those technologies, once, once you're able to carve them out and really make them a software that stands on its own, you're able to grow them in time.

So, what I love is that we do a project that does face tracking, and that means that all that face tracking functionality or ability is available for all the projects moving forward in our practice. Same with body tracking, hand tracking, and many other things that we do. So it's this idea of like, from this point on, we can do face tracking in the future, and it's just ready for us.

Hilary Knight: You've got, you've got your toolkit and your, your product suite.

Daniel Iregui: Yes, it's our product. And there's always, internally, there's this question, now that I talk about product, it's like, will it be worth it to, because Cursor is really its own software, with its own interface, and we made it, it's really for us, uses the data and everything, but it's really made for very fast setups and remote support.

Because that's what we need. Well, people ask us, why don't you make that, sell that tool to other studios, they, people will love it. And the reason that we haven't done that is that's just such a different business that you need to put to be able to just support and promote and commercialise that technology that when we started to look at it, it was like, what we have currently wouldn't work. We'll need to put another team besides it and I really didn't want to go there.

[00:31:24]
Hilary Knight: No, it's, it's a different, it's a separate business or a very different part of a business to then create a suite of products that you're licensing out and maintaining, as you say, and all the client support that comes with that as well I reckon I can understand it.

But it's really interesting to me that you're building your own tools to create the works that you're creating.

[00:31:44]
Daniel Iregui: Yeah, and the idea is, if we can go and buy it, or load it or whatever we'll do it. It's not really about creating tools for us or- what we do is really unique. There's not a lot of people doing this type of work. So, uh, every time we need something, we need to build it.

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[00:32:00]
Hilary Knight: Makes sense. Um, I'm curious, given that you work with so many new and emerging technologies, and technologies that probably don't feel new to you, what are the biggest challenges you're facing right now?

And are there any sort of emerging technologies or emerging trends that you're watching and thinking about?

[00:32:19]
Daniel Iregui: Yeah, so, you know, everything that has to do with creating artworks, that's constantly looking at how... What's the next artwork? What is that artwork going to bring to the table? And what technology do we need to develop to make that artwork exist? That's just constantly in our minds. And then, when it comes to presenting those artworks around the world, there's also everything that has to do with the form factor. So, as we expose around the world, how can we make sure that the artworks look the same?

We normally, when we do a large scale pieces, we will rent the large scale AV equipment locally. That works really well, but somehow we cannot have a consistent form factor, like we're depending on what's available and then how competent is the AV provider that that builds the thing.

So one of the things that now we're developing is like a modular system that allows us to create artworks that always look the same, as similar as possible. So everywhere we put them they look the same. So that's a big one. But because of that, then we're, then it means that we need to move more stuff from Montreal to where we're exposing.

So I don't think there's a future of digital technology in the world that we're living in, if we're not solving the how is it that we're sourcing the energy.

And how is it that we're going to be transporting, and basically reducing the carbon print of our work, And actually, one of the reasons that we chose climate and the environment as one of the themes, it was not because we had so much to say and we wanted to have the world reflect on it. It was mostly to force ourselves to become good at that, force ourselves to, you know, if we're talking about this we better fix that.

So, reducing the carbon footprint of our work needs to happen. It's not optional. This is, for me, the most challenging technology that we need to solve. There's no, the other things are optional, sort of multi user, well, let's say we cannot do 100 people in, in public space. Well, okay, we can wait, but this one, it's a, it's very urgent, so we need to solve it.

It's hard because it's out, it's sort of goes outside of our expertise. We need to work with people. We need to be looking at what others are doing. And also there's needs to be a shift on the way that we work and the way that we fund our projects as well. So that's a big challenge, I would say, from our work right now that basically it's existential in a way.

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[00:34:55]
Hilary Knight: That is absolutely a huge challenge, but quite an inspiring one as well.

The carbon impact of digital technologies and our ever expanding digital lives is something that isn't really discussed very often in the public sphere. And it's wonderful to hear you talking about it and that you're thinking about it so deeply and in so much detail. I can't wait to see how that thinking develops.

And thank you, Daniel, so much for your time today and for sharing your practice and your ideas and your thoughts. It's been such a fascinating conversation. I really enjoyed it.

[00:35:31]
Daniel Iregui: Hilary, thank you, it has been super fun to talk to you as well.

[00:35:34]
Hilary Knight: (laughs) Always a joy.

[00:35:36]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:35:38]
Hilary Knight: One of the things I enjoy most about public interactive art is seeing grownups play in public.

As adults, there are a bunch of norms for how we're expected to behave in public and outside of organised sport, that's with rather more seriousness and dignity than we'd expect of the average child. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm still a kid at heart.

So there's something kind of norm breaking, a tiny rebellion in putting aside the expectations of how adults are supposed to be, and playing! Doing this in public involves taking a tiny risk. We feel silly and self-conscious.

But taking the risk is worth it because there are benefits to play. Multiple studies show that playfulness in adults is correlated with better life satisfaction, improved ability to manage stress, and increased emotional resilience. In 2009, Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan wrote about play enhancing adults social skills and boosting intelligence, creativity, and problem solving.

And who doesn't want more of that?

Play doesn't have to be just fun, although there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. As Daniel Iregui said earlier, there is much more to engage with once you're interacting. It doesn't have to be visible either.

Last year, I put on a pair of headphones and joined two strangers in a game of pretend in a Texas shopping mall for an interactive audio work by ZU-UK called Radio Ghost.

[00:37:03]
Hilary Knight: To the casual observer, we looked like people listening to music while we shopped. But the work sent us on a mission around the mall, which was both fun and entertaining and contained serious reflections about current consumer culture. Play in public doesn't have to have rules or be directed.

Often, adding a playful element to already well understood infrastructure, such as those musical steps installed in metro stations around the world, is invitation enough.

People make up their own games with the tools they're given. As well as being fun, play can be a powerful connector of people. In 2016, creative studio Daily tous les jours conducted research into the usage of their musical swings in three public squares in North America. They found that around a third of people using the swings talked with someone new while doing so, and around 10 to 12 percent reported collaborating with a stranger to make a melody with the swings.

That's pretty cool. Creating spaces for playing in public can deliver joy and meaning on a human scale in the places where we're surrounded by towers of steel and concrete.

Now, this might sound like a bit of a stretch for a podcast, but I'm going to leave you with a video I saw this week of the ping pong tables in Bryant Park, New York. It's not exactly art. But I'd argue it's definitely beautiful. Free to use, and they are in all weathers, these tables have become a place for meeting, for building community, creating connection, and building shared meaning for people from all walks of life. The film is a short documentary about the regular players.

They share what the tables mean to them, and how playing together has been life affirming, and for some, life changing. It's a moving reminder of how stepping out of our adult seriousness and engaging in play in public will do us good. We'll put the link in the show notes, with links to the other works I've mentioned, and of course Daniel's amazing interactive pieces.

That's all from me this time.

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. Our theme music was created by Artwave Studio, which also sound mix our episodes. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. If you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice.

For The Three Bells, I'm Hilary Knight. Thank you for listening. And until next time, take care.

[00:39:24]
[THEME MUSIC]