MAIN SPACE

Xpace Cultural Centre

CURRENTS:
A Reflection On The Electric Gallery
Curated by Liana Mortin

Adam Basanta, Camille Jodoin-Eng, Zubin Isaac,
Hayley Mortin & Alicia Wright, and Xuan Ye

October 31 – December 12 2026

The artists in *Currents*, an exhibition in the Main Space at Xpace Cultural Centre, repurpose technology to reveal its hidden structures and limitations, challenging its perception as seamless and authoritative. While we consider ourselves to be contemplative and empathic creatures, we increasingly seem to be striving to live and work more like machines, elevating rationality and efficiency above all other forms of human experience. Rather than focusing solely on what technology does, these artists ask what technology does to *us*, examining how it reshapes our relations, alters our perception, and transforms our understanding of consciousness itself.

In an era in which we are rapidly being swallowed up by the hungry beast of technological advancement, constantly confronted by tedious algorithms, automated systems, and mind-numbing AI slop, it feels increasingly crucial to look to the past for

a guidepost for navigating the challenges that arise with new technologies. We can look to the history of technological art for models of how to approach these developments with care and critical engagement, while asking how we might retain our humanity within systems increasingly designed to shape the way we live, work and think.

This exhibition is informed by a research project on The Electric Gallery, a 1970s Toronto gallery that was, at the time, the only gallery in the world with the unique mandate to exclusively exhibit artworks powered by electricity. Owned by Sam and Jack Markle, artist-businessmen whose Toronto sign company created landmarks such as the Sam the Record Man sign and the computer system that powered Honest Ed's marquee, the gallery sought to demystify technology while also presenting it as an art form worthy of serious consideration.

The Electric Gallery operated within a network of artists and curators that were asking urgent questions and exploring radical ideas in a pre-internet world: How does technology shape human behaviour? How do systems interact with their environments? And how might these relations continue to evolve as technology becomes increasingly embedded in everyday life? In many ways, the experiments taking place at The Electric Gallery anticipated the technology ubiquity that defines our environment today.

In a catalogue accompanying *From Electrical Fire Spirits May be Kindled* (1977), an exhibition organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery featuring a selection of works from The Electric Gallery, technological artist Robert Arn argued that "today's landscape *is* technology," and that the "Last Optimists" are those who have "the pretension to suggest that art might transform or at least mitigate the infelicities of that world."[1]

[1] Ihor Holubizky Luke Rombout and Robert Arn, From *Electrical Fires Spirits May be Kindled (Benjamin Franklin): A Selection of Works from the Electric Gallery, Toronto* (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1977).

A major task of the technological landscape artist is to rescue the materials of our technoscape from the contempt and neglect that produces the ugliness that surrounds us… That is why I chose to call them the Last Optimists, for they are convinced that art can move among and interact with the forces that determine our existence.

– Robert Arn



Two canvases from Adam Basanta's installation *All We'd Ever Need is One Another* (2018), arranged across the south gallery walls, anticipated the rise of generative AI and NFTs, raising questions about authorship and artistic production. The original installation consisted of two flatbed scanners laying on their sides, with scanning surfaces facing one another. A custom script randomized the scanning settings to generate images autonomously, then deep-learning algorithms analyzed and compared each image to a database of contemporary artworks in economic and institutional circulation. When an image exceeded an 83% match with an existing artwork, it was "validated as art" and uploaded to the project's designated website. *All We'd Ever Need* asks what happens when machines participate not only in the making of art, but also in determining what qualifies as art.

Basanta's *Self-portrait* (2021), occupying the back-east gallery wall, emerged from an improvised activity of disassembling discarded LCD televisions. Basanta was repeatedly surprised by the variation and aesthetic qualities of the parts revealed through the process, recontextualizing technology in a way that focuses solely on its aesthetic qualities rather than its usefulness. By playfully framing discarded television parts as a "self-portrait", Basanta humanizes the technology, implicitly calling to mind canonical self-portraits as a means of examining identity. The work suggests how

deeply these devices have become extensions of ourselves, and how difficult it has become to separate our identities from the technologies through which we experience the world.

Marine Learning (2025), initially created by Hayley Mortin in response to a computer vision model designed to see through water, examines the limits of machine perception. Hung on the west gallery wall, the warped underwater footage printed on paper resembles CAPTCHA texts more than conventional photographs, fractured visuals and distorted text revealing what the machine still struggles to interpret. The work combines this imagery with Alicia Wright's crocheted frame, based on a 17th-century seaweed illustration and dyed and bound with SeaCell fibre. By translating a vision model's imperfect attempt to "see" into textile form, the work presents machine vision as fragile and constructed rather than objective. This project exposes its interpretive qualities, as its outputs are still in the faulty process of learning.

Along the centre column of the main space, "Symbol Minded," from Zubin Isaac's 2024 studio album *Machine Yearning*, explores humanity through the perspective of an unnamed extra-terrestrial technological entity inhabiting a fictional near-future world. The album examines how humans change in response to technological stimuli. Its visuals combine multiple AI technologies, audio-reactive softwares and vintage analog video hardware, while its music merges cybernetic patching with live performance. Drawing on the concept of the uncanny valley—the discomfort elicited by creations that almost, but not quite, resemble humans—*Machine Yearning* blurs the boundaries between the real, the artificial, and the increasingly ambiguous space between them.

Camille Jodoin-Eng's *Fortress* (2016), placed along the forward-east gallery wall, meditates on how interior experience, such as memory, psyche and intuition, might be represented in physical form. The lightbox appears suspended outside of time, at once

ancient and futuristic, where lived environments converge with the landscapes of the mind. Using the otherworldly material of neon light to represent interiority, Jodoin-Eng creates an interplay between human experience and technology, suggesting that technology can become a means of contemplating what remains internal and intangible.

In March 2016, a computer program developed by Google DeepMind, named AlphaGo, defeated 18-time world champion Lee Sedol 4–1 in the abstract strategy boardgame, *Go*. Inspired by this historic challenge match, Xuan Ye's *The Insider* (2018/2021/2025), spanning the north gallery wall, reveals the labour, energy, and infrastructure behind artificial intelligence systems. The work presents a scaled-down model of the hundreds of computer processors normally hidden from view, while an augmented reality application overlays quotations from philosopher Thomas Metzinger's *The Ego Tunnel*, which explores the self as a biological illusion. By connecting machine intelligence to the constructed nature of human consciousness, Ye suggests that both AI systems and human beings have built-in blind spots, processes occurring within ourselves that can never be fully grasped.

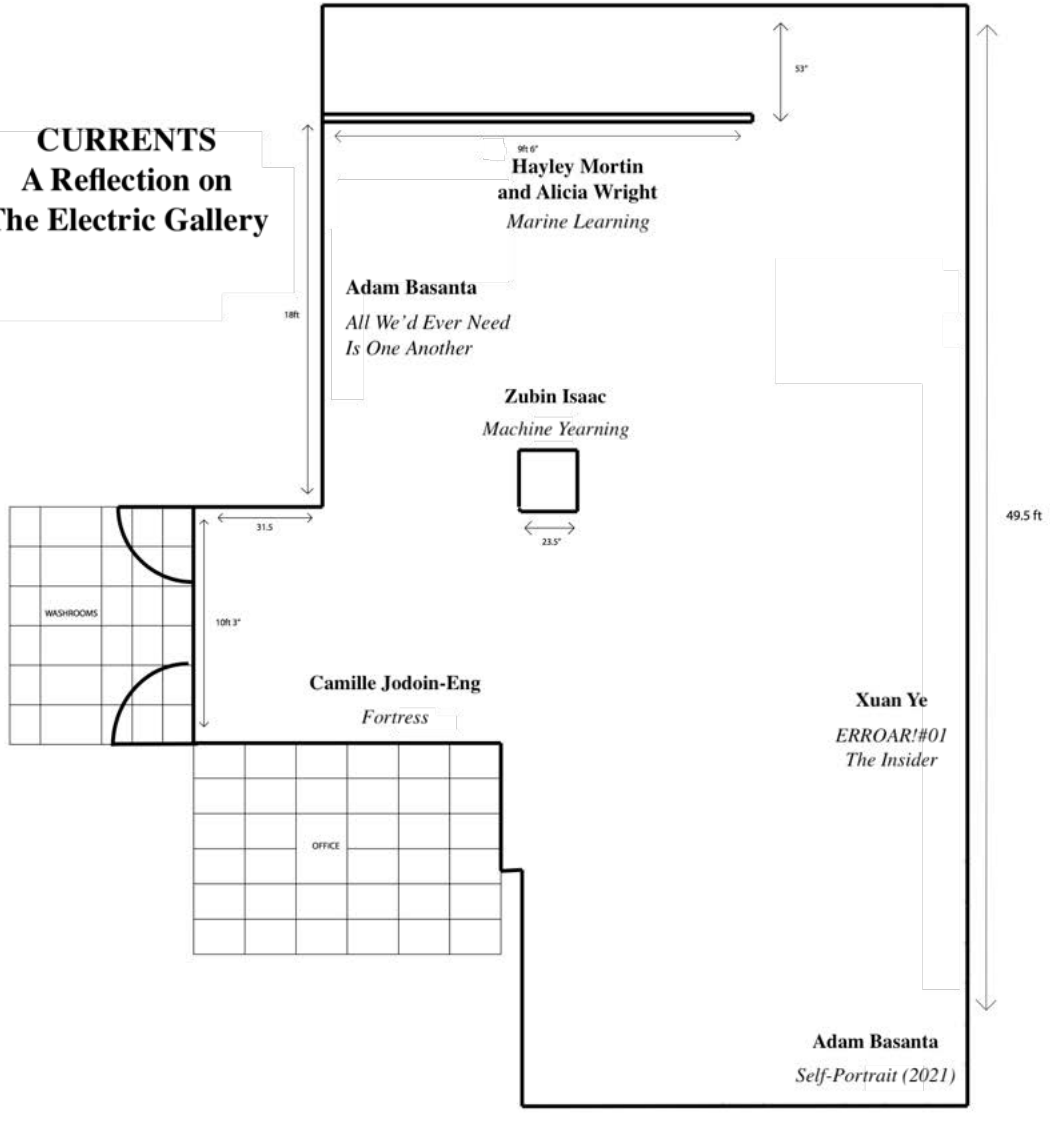


The significance of The Electric Gallery was not only its role as a pioneering institution in the practice of electric and kinetic art, but also for the questions that were being asked within its walls about the technological landscape itself. In a time when it was starting to become clear that technological advancement was inevitable, they probed with curiosity rather than unquestioning faith. They turned the technologies inside out, examining what unexplored capabilities were revealed when put in artists hands. The owners, curators and artists at The Electric Gallery were not simply advocates, nor were they disparagers of the technological landscape, they believed that even within an

increasingly technological world, there was still beauty and meaning to be made. The works in *Currents* carry forward The Electric Gallery's legacy, embodying the optimism of remaining inquisitive and approaching these challenges with care for our shared humanity.

– Liana Mortin

CURRENTS
A Reflection on The Electric Gallery



Hayley Mortin and Alicia Wright
Marine Learning

Adam Basanta
All We'd Ever Need Is One Another

Zubin Isaac
Machine Yearning

Camille Jodoin-Eng
Fortress

Xuan Ye
ERROAR!#01 The Insider

Adam Basanta
Self-Portrait (2021)