

# Fibers & Textiles

# THE FIBERS AND TEXTILES PROJECT: A co-creation encounter

# What happens when artists, academics, and industry experts collaborate?

By Molly-Claire Gillett

The Fibers and Textiles Co-Creation Project dove into this question with an experiment in co-creation that facilitated dialogue and skill-sharing between emerging artists, the Montreal textile and garment industry, and academic research – and explored the dynamics of co-creation itself. Produced and coordinated by Montreal artist-run center Eastern Bloc, with funding from the City of Montreal, the project centered collaboration between the Milieux Institute's Textiles and Materiality Research Cluster (Concordia University), the apparel research and innovation center Vestechpro (Cégep Marie-Victorin), HEC Montreal's Mosaic Creativity and Innovation Hub, and emerging Montreal artists Jacqueline Beaumont and Rythâ Kesselring. The artists were invited to work on new projects with technicians and equipment at Vestechpro, Eastern Bloc and the

Textiles and Materiality Research Cluster, while also meeting regularly with their collaborators. In a series of interviews, meetings and discussions, the artist, industry and academic participants unpacked the processes, challenges and potential of co-creation throughout the project. The final outcomes included not only artist talks and a public presentation of the conceptual wearables produced during the two-month period, but also a short documentary and series of texts that document the project and draw out the exciting potential of co-creation as a method of collaborative thinking, learning and making.

“We see clothing as a great canvas for artists to express themselves, and garments or clothing widely speaking is a vocabulary that is very well understood by the vast majority of people, so we figured that it could be used as a vehicle for communicating, for expressing ideas” - HB

# What is co-creation?

Co-creation is creating collectively. When used to develop products and concepts, this way of working is sometimes called co-design, and involves bringing stakeholders together to work on a central question or project, often using workshops and discussion groups as a space to share ideas. Combining unique perspectives, expertise and experience, co-creators or co-designers ask complex questions and often arrive at innovative solutions that would not have been possible otherwise.

Because it involves stakeholders from diverse backgrounds with varied skill sets, co-creation as a research method is a transdisciplinary process: it synthesizes the methods and tools of academic disciplines with those from the arts, industries or relevant communities. In turn, participants from those fields engage with scholarly research in ways they might not usually have the time or resources to. Fibers and Textiles co-creation participant Helen Brunet of Vestechpro notes that, in fact, these ways of working can sometimes bear much in common: “There is a parallel to be established between the creative process and the applied research process. In both ways artists and researchers are trying to solve a problem, address an issue and present results that are going to make changes in our society, that are going to make either art or the garment industry evolve to serve the community in the best possible way.”

This synthesis between research and creation in the arts is referred to in the Canadian context as research-creation. Artist Rythâ Kesselring described her work on the co-creation project as research-creation, and emphasized the importance of freeing participants to experiment with different ways of thinking and making: “to me, research-creation is about giving time to the artist to research.”

“Maybe we have a misunderstanding of what speed is, and a misunderstanding of what productivity is. When we’re creating quickly we’re not really engaging to learn.” -RK

“To me, research creation is about giving time to the artist to research.” -RK



# Co-creation in District Central

In conceptualizing the Fibers and Textiles Co-Creation Project, the facilitators were interested in what would happen when a group of participants united by an investment in textiles, fibers and wearables were gathered together to engage in co-creation – not with the intention of finalizing a product, but to document and learn from the co-creation process itself.

Eastern Bloc, a Montreal artist-run center, had recently moved to District Central, a business hub in Montreal's historic textile district, and was eager to implement a project that would engage with the community's history and vibrant present as a growing business and innovation center. As project facilitators, they assembled a team united by an interest in textiles and innovation, who brought resources and perspectives from academia, industry and the arts.

Vestechpro, a fashion, technology and smart clothing innovation lab based in Cégep Marie-Victorin and represented by Helen Brunet, brought technical expertise in manufacturing as well as space and equipment for experimentation.

Laurent Simon, co-founder and director of Mosaic, a creativity and innovation management research and development center at HEC Montreal, brought experience working with business and public sector organizations on creative management in innovation.

Miranda Smitheram, a designer and researcher with a background in textiles and fashion, represented the Milieux Institute, a research center at Concordia University. With a background in fashion and textile design and current research practice oriented around the decolonization of matter, Smitheram provided expertise in the methods and practices of research-creation, while the Milieux Institute's Textiles and Materiality Cluster offered access to specialized laboratory equipment and support from skilled technicians.



# Co-creation as process

For about two months, the two artists worked on new projects with technicians at Vestechpro, Eastern Bloc and the Milieux Institute, while Laurent Simon and the team at Mosaic facilitated real-time reflection on the co-creation process, hosting meetings with the team to discuss what was happening and what was being learned.

Both Beaumont and Kesselring found that the opportunity to collaborate with technicians to use unfamiliar technology pushed their work in unexpected directions. For Beaumont, developing a synthetic and printable feminized 'jock cup' that raises questions about transgender identity, wearables and queer kinship, working with the technicians meant that together they could "lean on each other's strengths rather than learn along the way. The way that we were approaching working together [was] a little bit more collaborative, which gave a different flow."

Rythâ Kesselring, weaving together fibers, speakers, and mics to create a garment that prompts multi-sensory exploration of space, remarked on the unique opportunity to work with technicians and train in the use of industrial equipment. It pushed her to experiment, articulate her ideas to diverse audiences and gain a different perspective on her practice through hearing feedback from collaborators. The discussion sessions with researchers and technicians allowed her to unpack how these interactions impacted the whole group: "it kind of helped also to situate ourselves as artists, that actually what we do is important [...] to be in this context where people were really productive [...] they actually said that they learned from us, in the end there was an exchange."



# Co-creation as process

Group sessions also offered a space to workshop the conceptual and technical elements of the two projects. Co-creators discussed the relationships between wearables, the body, identity and kinship, as well as the ecological and economic elements of textile arts, the pros and cons of various tools and processes and specific challenges such as designing a sound-proof hood for Kesselring's sensory garment. The participants also discussed their experience of the co-creation process as a whole. Their reflections highlighted the importance of transparency and communication, and led to dialogue about better facilitating exchange between their diverse areas of expertise and working methods, and strategies for documenting and reporting on their work.



"It changed my understanding of what a technician is. When the technician became a production assistant, it was so much more responsive and had a quick impact, I could see things on the fly and make tweaks in real time [...] we could lean on each other's strengths rather than learn along the way." -JB

The way that we were approaching working together [was] a little bit more collaborative, which gave a different flow." -JB

# Co-creation: outcomes and possibilities

The Fibers and Textiles Co-Creation Project resulted in several conference presentations and the display of the artists' work-in-progress – notably at the Fab City Montreal co-design event in March 2022 – as well as a documentary collaging the participants' perspectives. The group's innovative use of co-creation as a process has also prompted interest from other businesses and organizations in District Central, who recognized the value of continuing to facilitate collaboration between researchers, artists and industry experts. Alicia Turgeon, Eastern Bloc Director, was invited to sit on the District Central's expert committee on sustainable development. Eastern Bloc has also been approached by businesses in the area interested in putting together a similar working group or coordinating a design charrette.

Miranda Smitheram highlighted the importance of the project's localized nature, and the way that it was informed by the history and present-day activities of the District Central: "I loved the fact that it is very anchored and centered in a neighborhood, and I thought it was a really wonderful opportunity to sort of build some bridges and build some connection points in that neighborhood, and be thinking about what does it mean to be working in processes that are slow – collaboration takes time, and co-creation as well – but often powerful."

This interest in continuing the process of co-creation points to the project's central strength: it was concerned with process rather than outcome. In posing the question of what happens when artists, researchers and industry experts come together

to co-create, it opened a shared space for thinking and making that pushed participants to learn from each other and rely on each other's strengths, while also co-creating new ways of working collectively. Reflecting on the project, Turgeon highlighted this generative exchange between art and industry: "where it became really strong as a project was having the artists coming to places where they were not really expected, and asking crazy questions, and having crazy ideas, and really pushing the technicians [...] to rethink how they can use those same machines." Jacqueline Beaumont summed up her experience of co-creation in a similar way: "embedding artists into that context allows for artists to tie ends together where there may not be connections [...] the artists become a medium between industry and academics."

In mapping the process of co-creation from start to finish, the Fibers and Textiles Co-Creation Project offered valuable insight into the workings of creative collaboration between art, industry and academics. Beyond incubating two innovative conceptual wearables that will continue to be developed and exhibited, it demonstrated how co-creation can lead to 'crazy' questions and ideas, altered perspectives, and new approaches to the critical issues that researchers, artists and industry experts face today.

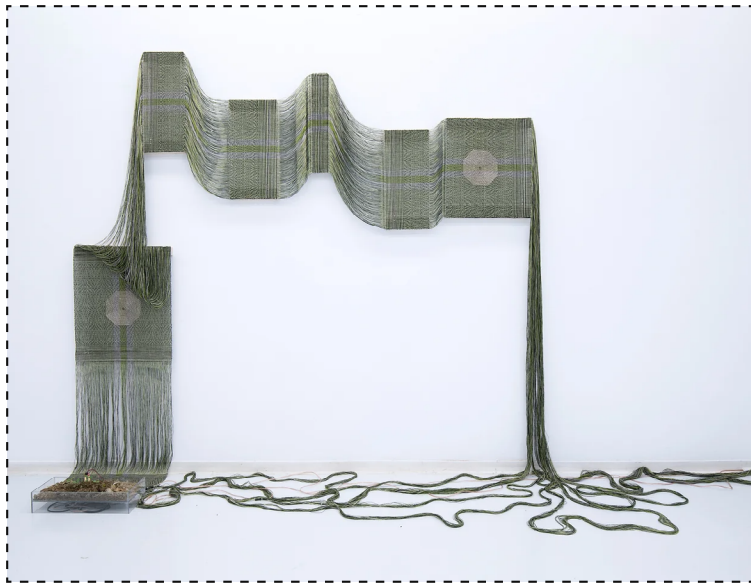
"Embedding artists into that context allows for artists to tie ends together where there may not be connections and gives a higher chance for there to be new connections. The artists become a medium between industry and academics." -JB



Ryth Kesselring's research focuses on memories, traces and methods of archiving that are linked to objects, places and communities. She is interested in the notion of materiality in the form of social weaving, which she interprets in tactile and sound works. Her choice of medium focuses on fibrous materials, which she incorporates into her paintings, installations, performances and interactive works.

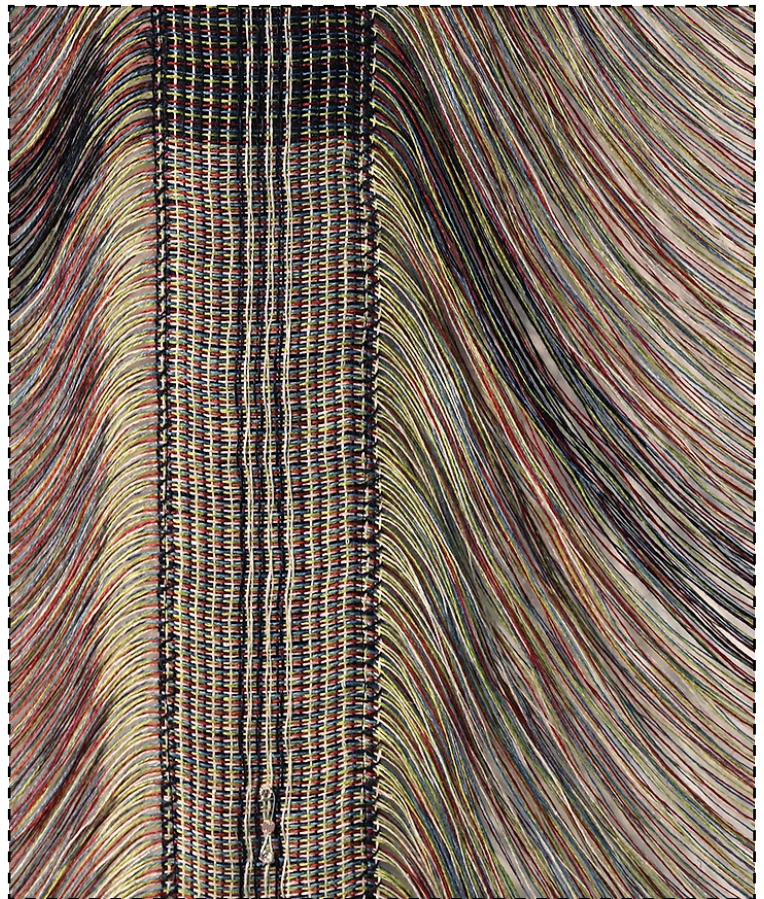






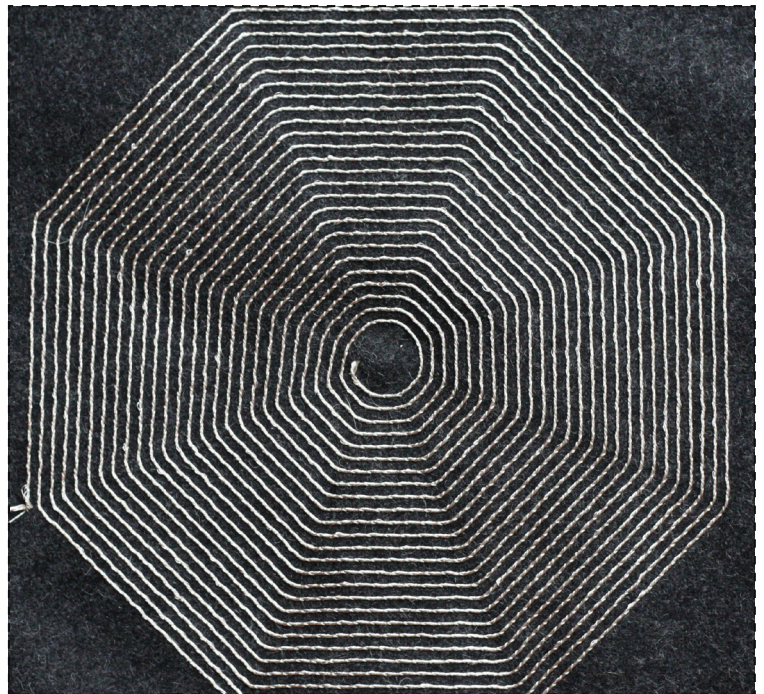
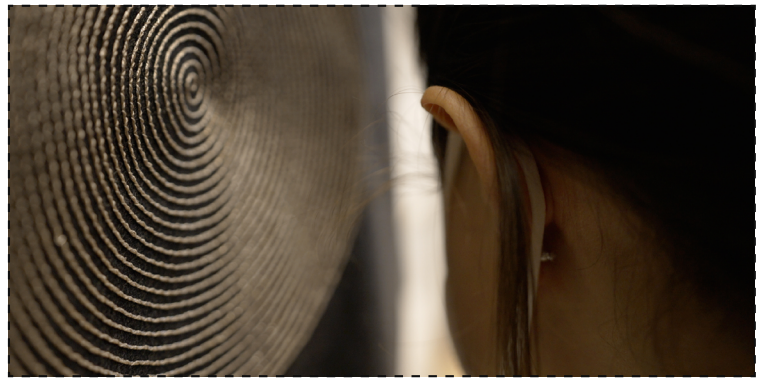
Before entering the project, she was working on a recent series entitled «Ecosystem.» These interactive installations are composed of hand-woven linen textiles, sonic elements, and growing American silk and flax plants.

The autonomous installations interact with their immediate environment while also measuring ambient light and the humidity in the soil of the growing plants. In response to these factors, an ongoing sonic composition made of recordings of the weaving loom and nature modulates according to the measurements. The subtle additions to the Sonosphere emerge through embroidered textile speakers embedded in the woven panels.



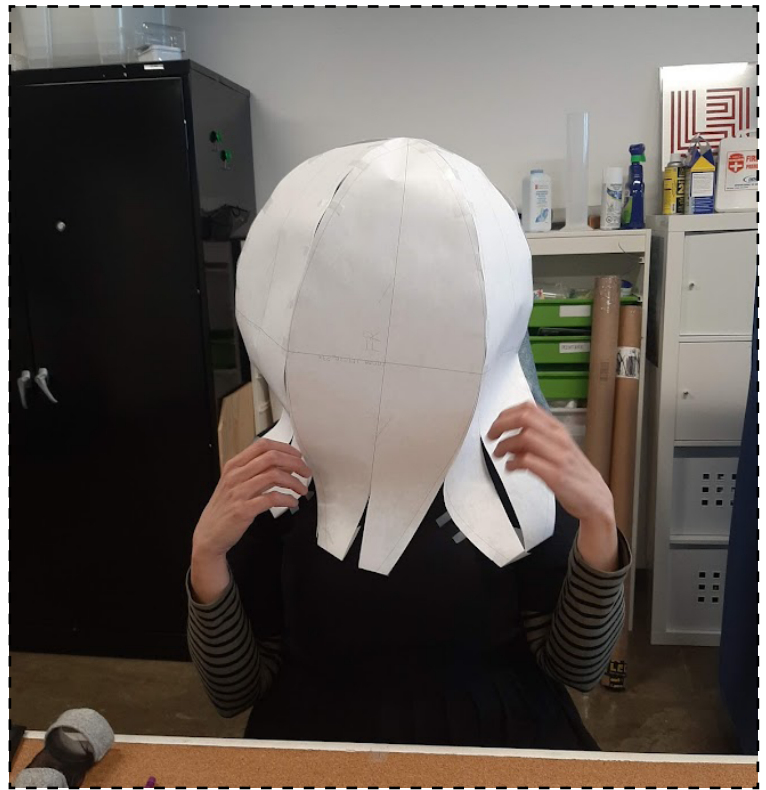


As part of this journey, she revisits her technique of fabricating embroidered speakers with conductive silver thread. By modifying the circuit, the speaker process can be inverted and turned into a microphone, now picking up the subtle, ongoing sounds of one's physical space.





This led to the creation of patterns and mockups around the conceptualization of a sound-based, sensorial wearable. The piece would allow the wearer to reconsider both their surroundings and their being in space. It aims to uncover the sounds that go unnoticed, amplifying one's auditory environment into an insulated hood that reminds one of an anechoic chamber. In this way, the wearer is at once both isolated and in conversation with their environment.



Thought to be decorated with embroidery inspired by weaving roots, the work would be tied to the surroundings with which it interacts. The aforementioned embroidery has the potential to be partly decorative (with polyester thread) and partly conductive, becoming a microphone to its surroundings.

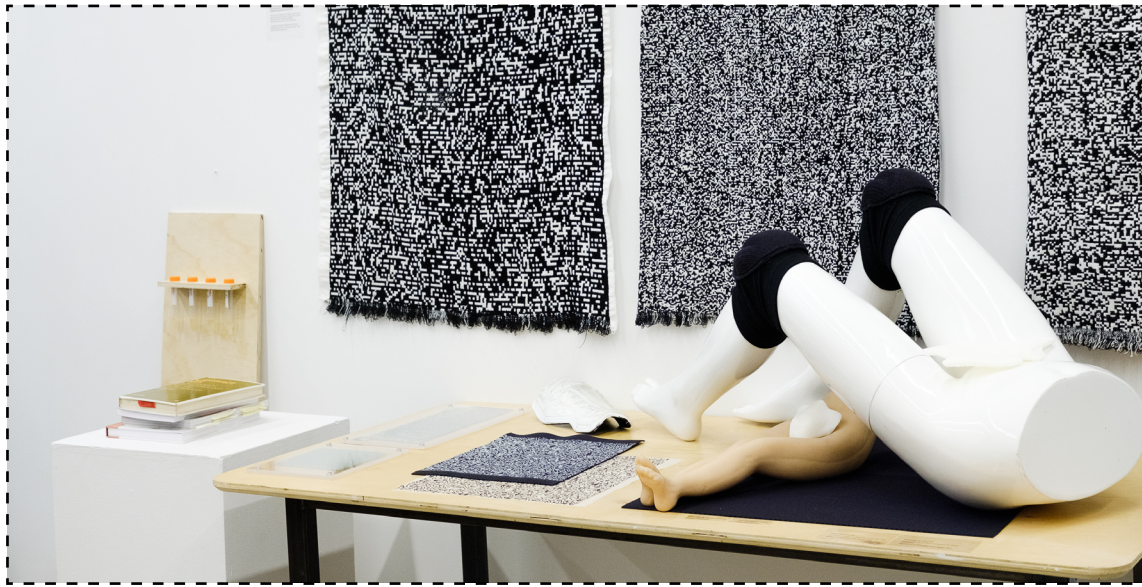
In this way, the textile can be understood as an interface, opening the wearer to new ways of interacting with, accessing, and considering their physical context.



As such, she experimented with embroidery and layered embellishment patterns in laser-cut wool and polyester blend.



Jacqueline Beaumont is a bio-media artist, researcher, and designer exploring the relationships between biotechnology, sex, nature/culture, and materialism. Her work enhances the perception of the body, culture, media, and power. Her research explores the intersection of transgender health, fetishization, and material culture through trans-corpomateriality and feminist science studies.

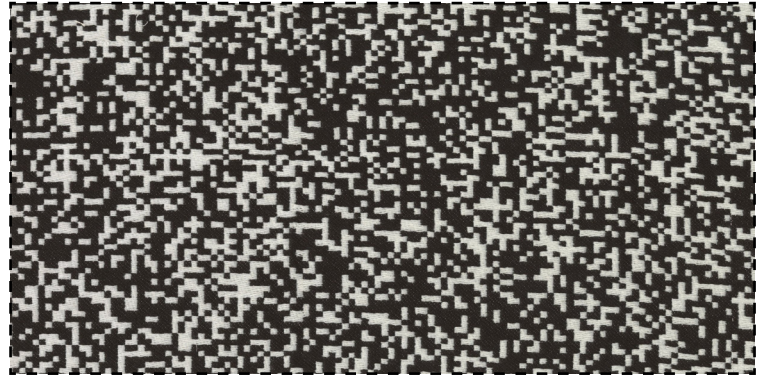
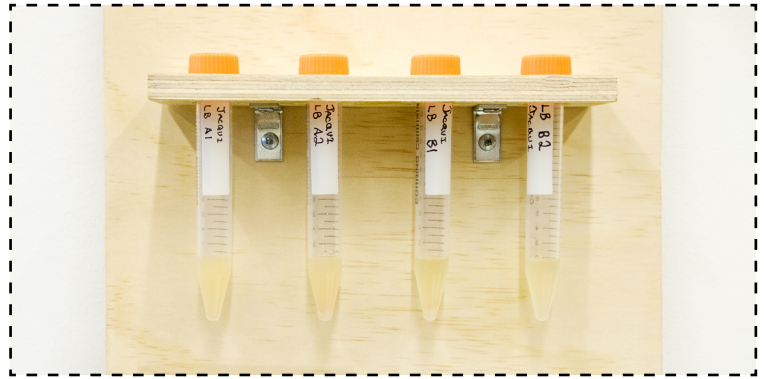


In 2022, as she delved into the project, one of her most recent creations was titled 'Post-Binary Genetic Sequences' (PBGS).



PBGS weaves a fabric of defiance, blurring the realms of bioinformatics, art, and activism. Nine handwoven tapestries challenge binary thinking by unraveling the mitochondrial DNA of *Apis mellifera*, Covid-19, HIV, *Orcinus orca*, *Psilocybe cubensis*, *Octopus bimaculoides*, *Sepia officinalis*, *Corallium rubrum*, and *Heteronympha merope* into black and white pixels. Collectively, through scale, these binary units form fuzzy, gray vistas of bioinformatic noise.

These pixels become threads when woven by hand on a computerized Jacquard loom, compiling optically into hypnotic, large-format tapestries reminiscent of QR codes or television static, rendering our binary frameworks more discernible through perspective.



Throughout the project, she contemplated the design of a 'dysphoria hoodie.' This term, popular in trans communities, refers to a hoodie designed to completely envelop the wearer's form, thereby concealing the gendered features of their body.

She produced samples featuring mitochondria and genetic sequences printed on silk organza. Additionally, she experimented with *Elaeis guineensis* (huile de palme), laser-engraving on Nylon ripstop, as well as printing on aeroprene and polyester.



The co-creation journey also facilitated the conceptualization of another significant work.

Biomimetically evolved from the jock-cup, Armour\_1 is an object designed for the preservation of human reproductive futures. It protects the wearer from impact, defending both the reproductive future of that body and the continuity of family. Specifically, her discourse focuses on how MTF transgender bodies are left in a state of biopolitical limbo, chemically castrated by the sparkling promise of divine feminine biomedical intervention.

The jock-cup/petri-dish has been inoculated with 6 cultivated skin microbiome samples from her non-genealogical, chosen family members. This micro-terrarium serves as a generative soft architecture, housing and preserving queer biological kin-making. It forms a world in which parts of ourselves can live, die, and putrefy together amidst planetary socio-reproductive emergencies.





# Ressources

Note: these are some resources I came across in the writing process, as well as some questions that emerged for me around the project and content. They may be helpful in future iterations of this text, should they come to be!

## Articles

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Rex Degnegaard,  
“Co-creation, prevailing streams and a future design trajectory,”  
CoDesign 10:2 (2014): 96-111.

Venkat Ramaswamy & Ozcan Kerimcan,  
“What is co-creation? An interactional creation framework and its implications for value creation,”  
Journal of Business Research 84 (2018): 196-205.

Elizabeth B.-N. Sanders & Pieter Jan Stappers,  
“Co-creation and the new landscapes of design,”  
CoDesign, 4:1 (2018): 5-18.

## Livres

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Natalie Loveless.  
How to Make Art at the End of the World: a Manifesto for Research-Creation  
(Durham: Duke, 2019).

Katerina Cizek and William Uricchio.  
Collective Wisdom: Co-Creating Media for Equity and Justice  
(Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022).

Stefanie Jansen and Maartin Pieters.  
The 7 Principles of Complete Co-Creation.  
BisPublishers, n.d.

## Journal

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CoDesign: International Journal of CoCreation in Design and the Arts.

# Thank You

## Project participants

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Alicia Turgeon, General and Artistic Direction at Eastern Bloc

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and co-director at Mosaic, Creativity and Innovation Hub, HEC Montreal

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Dr. Miranda Smitheram, co-director of the Textiles and Materiality Research Cluster  
at Milieux Institute of Arts, Culture and Technology at Concordia University

Jacqueline Beaumont, Transdisciplinary bio-artist, researcher, and material practitioner

Rythm Kesselring, Multidisciplinary Artist

## Credits

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Studio Épiphanie, Production documentaire

Molly-Claire Gillett, Article Writing

Philippe Fortier, Translation

Demande Spéciale, Visual Identity

# Thank You

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