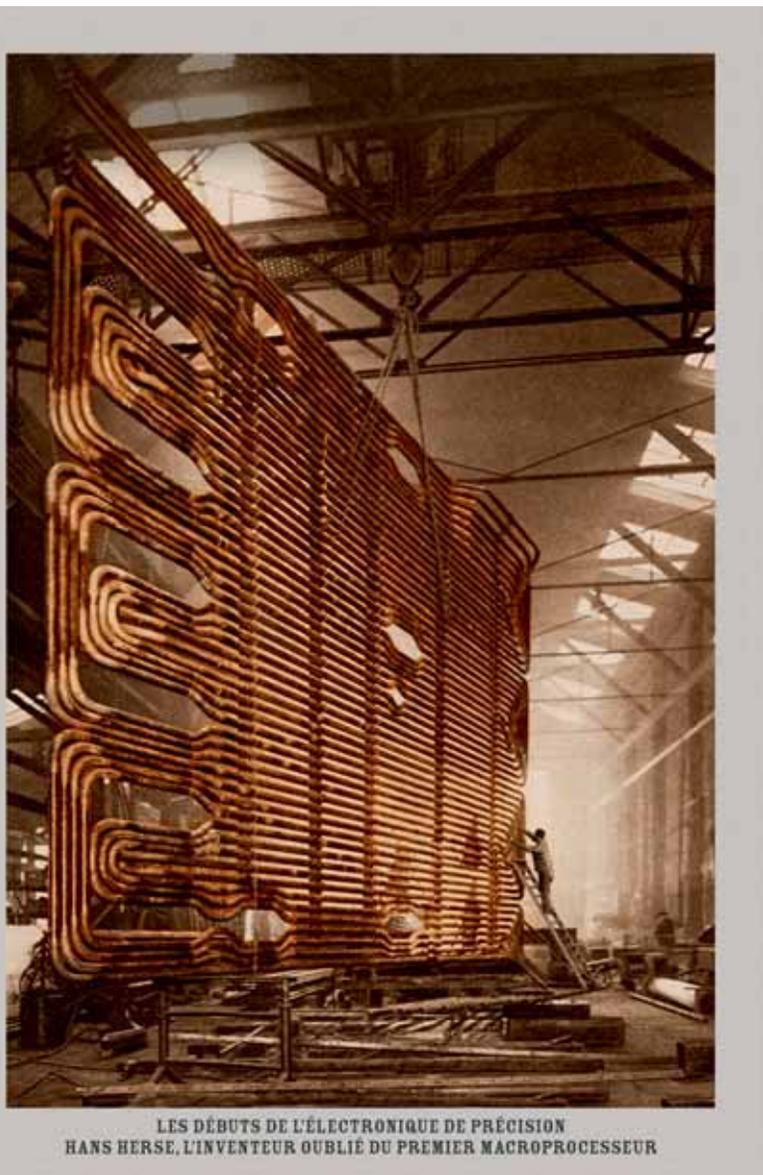


Creativeness **without** the **bother**



Early electronics. Hans Herse, the forgotten inventor of the first macro-processor.

Brigitte Rebetez

Can there be anything in common between an off-beat humourist and a top-class watchmaker? The Swiss Creative Center (SCC) in Neuchâtel certainly thinks so. This ideas laboratory, set up last year in partnership with a number of professional schools, brings together researchers, designers, engineers, experts of every stripe and humourists, like Plonk &

Replonk, to trigger innovation. The scheme won over Greubel Forsey straight away and it was the first watchmaking company to join up. “We pay great attention to new developments,” says the company CEO, Emmanuel Vuille. “Going around these workshops gives us an idea of what might be happening beyond tomorrow, in 10 or 20 years. We meet academics and artists who have interesting, eye-opening insights into the future.”

The Swiss Creative Center’s method is to hold brainstorming sessions with guest experts. “We’ve noticed that companies are reluctant to employ highly creative people because they’re difficult to manage,” explains Xavier Comtesse, head of the SCC. “They prefer to use them temporarily according to a service contract.” Hence the concept of the Center, which gives entrepreneurs access to a portfolio of creative minds. They hold frequent meetings together to generate innovative projects. It covers all areas – tourism, design, energy. Although giving birth to a new product after a few sessions is not the main aim of the exercise, it has happened a few times. A checking in and out system for hotels and a new kind of supermarket basket were thus brought into being, for the facilities include a FabLab where great concepts are turned into immediate reality. Just about any design, mini-robot or other object can be materialised in this magic laboratory. An array of equipment – 3D printers, laser cutters, multi-axis milling machines, electronic prototyping devices – governed by generic software, produces models in a matter of hours. But this is rather played down at the Center. “It’s more the ingenuity of the people who operate FabLab, rather than machine technology, that enables us to offer original solutions.”

Greubel Forsey has enrolled its staff from its communications, laboratory and social networking departments in the Center’s “thinklabs.” “Because we’re a small organisation, we have no choice but to remain on the alert,” explains Emmanuel Vuille, who likes the network’s culture and the following that has grown around it. One of the creative minds at the SCC is none other than Elmar Mock, co-inventor of the Swatch. This watchmaking engineer still promotes the creative breakthrough, as he reveals in his book published last year with Gilles Garel, *La fabrique de l’innovation* – the innovation factory. ●