

## ILLUMINATING PUBLIC SPACE

### LIGHT SHOWS IN CONTEMPORARY ART

Every year light shows attract millions of spectators around the globe; however, little critical attention is given to this genre. These shows are often featured in major tourist centers, including night spectacles at the Pyramids of Giza; the talking fountains at Caesars Palace, Las Vegas; and projections on screens of water at Epcot Center. Others, like laser shows at planetariums or firework displays commemorating special holidays, are present in most urban centers in the West. Contemporary artists have usually scoffed at these presentations, finding them too banal to merit serious aesthetic consideration. Yet a number of new media artists, attracted by sophisticated technologies and potentially huge audiences, are developing light shows. How to effectively intervene in such an ideologically loaded field? How not to succumb to kitsch and cheap propaganda when using a medium of such mass appeal? These are some of the challenges such artists have to contend with.

An historical account of light shows and their origins may help answer some of these questions. Introduced to Europe from China, fireworks became run-of-the-mill for urban political rituals such as national holidays or New Year celebrations. But with its introduction, electrical lighting rapidly became the favorite medium for such events. The first public demonstrations of lighting using voltaic arcs were in 1870. The sight of the Brooklyn Bridge or a skyscraper spectacularly lit up changed urban nightlife forever: A new urban landscape technologically transformed by electricity was coming into being.

Almost all innovations in electrical technology—including electric signs, illuminated fountains, searchlights, and spotlights—appeared for the first time at world fairs. At the 1889 Paris Universal Exposition, the public encountered the Electric Palace, a breath-taking pavilion whose 12,000 dazzling lights and brightly-lit fountains attracted thousands of amazed spectators every night. Powerful spotlights placed on top of the recently constructed Eiffel Tower lit, from far above, the finest buildings on the exposition site. A few years later, on the other side of the Atlantic, electric lighting became a central motif in the 1893 Columbian Exposition of Chicago. In the Court of Honor, the main area of the exposition, two gigantic illuminated fountains shot 150,000 liters of water per minute. The Columbian Exposition, also known as the White City, had more electric lighting than any American city of the time. Considering that in 1888 less than 1 percent of U.S. households had electricity, the effect must have been awe-inspiring. The visual bombardment of these shows allowed urban dwellers to begin contemplating the enormous inherent power of this new energy source. Since electricity itself was invisible, electric lighting became the best way to demonstrate the omnipotence of this new form of energy.

David Nye's concept of the "technological sublime" is especially helpful when describing the effect lighting shows had on the masses.<sup>1</sup> If Kant invoked the sublime to describe how human beings felt humbled when confronted with the immensity and grandeur of Nature, Nye uses the technological sublime to describe how individuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries related to major technolog-



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Vectorial Elevation*, Relational Architecture 4, Mexico City, Mexico. Photo by Martin Vargas

ical feats such as dams, skyscrapers, and electric light shows. Notions of natural and artificial were blurred, and what emerged was a synthetic environment evoking mystical feelings that sanctified technological progress. Furthering these mystical associations, pseudoreligious and overtly Judeo-Christian iconography permeated these lighting shows.

Large corporations, realizing how night lighting attracted public attention, started illuminating their head offices; the brilliant glow seemed to proclaim the company's good health. In 1908, the Singer Tower in New York, the highest in the world at that time, was the first to be bathed in light from powerful spotlights. By 1913, the Woolworth Skyscraper was also lit up, and its visibility from any point in the city made it the best advertisement for the company's chain of commercial establishments. Even governments started to realize the political advantages of the patriotic sentiment awakened by the illumination of important cultural symbols. In the United States, dramatic lighting of the Statue of Liberty, Capitol Hill, the White House, and Niagara Falls created precedents that were subsequently copied by all the central powers in Europe.

The political use of lighting reached its height with the huge nighttime events orchestrated by architect Albert Speer for the Nazi regime. The most

famous of these was the *Dome of Light*, formed by 100 powerful searchlights pointing skyward, which was staged during the 1935 Nazi Party Congress in Nuremberg. These light shows visually anticipated the use of military anti-aircraft surveillance used all across Europe a few years later during the Second World War. A similar event was the German Solstice Festival celebrated in Berlin Stadium in 1938, during which a swastika was formed by thousands of individuals holding torches. Walter Benjamin described these Nazi ceremonies as producing an image of the "fungibility of mass man." The ceremonies "compared human beings with a control panel on which are thousands of electric light bulbs: first these die out, then others light themselves anew."<sup>2</sup>

Today artists are responding to the hyper-lit world of corporate and government propaganda by creating their own large-scale lighting interventions in public spaces. The presence or absence of the citizen in today's urban landscape is one of the issues that Rafael Lozano-Hemmer explores in *Vectorial Elevation*. For many years this Mexican-Canadian artist has been altering the interpretation of urban settings through technological interventions, a process he calls "relational architecture." *Vectorial Elevation* was initially produced as part of the millennium celebrations taking place in Mexico City. Since then it has been presented in Vitoria

Leo Villareal, *Star*, Socrates Sculpture Park, Long Island City, N.Y., 2003-04. Photos by Chris Baker



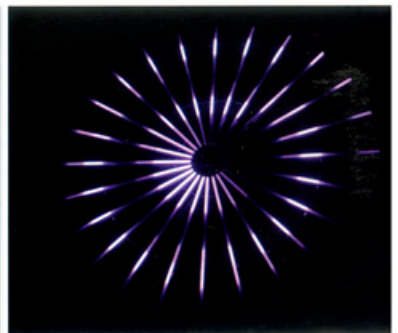
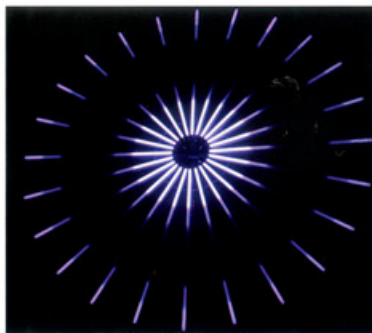
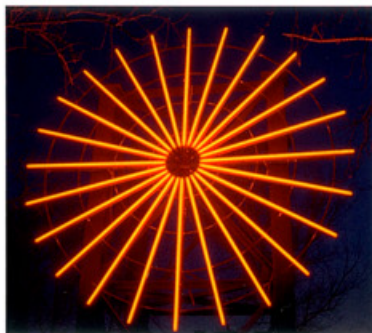


Leo Villareal, *Supercluster*, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York City, N.Y., 2004. Photo by Lilly Weng

(Spain), Lyon, and Dublin. On the *Vectorial Elevation* web page, individuals across the globe configure striated light structures using their computer mouse and keyboard. Once completed, the light patterns are executed in the airspace above the city with powerful xenon searchlights. From dusk to dawn, these searchlights comb the night air, resulting in one of the most memorable public art pieces of recent years. The collective effort of thousands of authors produces a rhythmic ballet of light,

provoking fascinating reflections on the complex relationship between urban space and cyberspace.

Although *Vectorial Elevation* may appear to be a mass spectacle reminiscent of those designed by Speer, it radically inverts the terms of those Babylonian extravaganzas by offering the public control of the show. *Vectorial Elevation* is an antimonument of distributed power created by thousands of Internet users who contribute their personal composition to the



final piece. It avoids the vision of the Internet as the materialization of an Orwellian Big Brother. It also raises fundamental questions about the identity of the individual in cyberspace, the relationship between urban and electronic space, and the reinterpretation of the citizen as a social and political being of the future.

Projection of the digital realm onto public space is also found in Jennifer Steinkamp's *Aria*. Created for the Fremont Experience Canopy in Las Vegas, this piece ups the ante for artists wanting to engage with mass spectacle. The Fremont Experience is a ninety-foot-high, four-block-long electronic canopy created to bring life back to the old downtown, which was upstaged by the new casinos lining the Strip. It is the largest electric sign in the world and pumps out 550,000 watts of concert-quality sound. Themed shows featured on this unusual medium range from hits of the disco era to Christmas specials. They employ visuals that constantly fragment and reconfigure, creating a powerful if vacuous kaleidoscopic effect. Steinkamp was invited by the City of Las Vegas Art Commission to create her piece for the Fremont Experience. The choice of the Los Angeles-based new media artist could not have been more appropriate. Influenced by 1960s dance club light shows, Duchamp's rotoreliefs, and other op-art experiments in sensory immersion, Steinkamp usually grafts baroque computer graphics onto gallery spaces. The abstract computer graphics of *Aria* were inspired, according to the artist, by Disney's *Fantasia* and Douglas Trumbull's corridor sequence from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The special effects in these landmark films are often cited as particularly powerful incorporations of the spectator in cinematic fan-



tasy. Likewise, *Aria* unapologetically embraces the language of special effects, turning the pedestrian into a spectator of a highly mediated urban experience. The computer animation suggests flowing liquid elements. Colorful ribbons ripple like waves, short cylindrical figures behave like salmon swimming upstream, drops cascade along the vast expanse of the canopy—all of this to the rhythm of Jimmy Johnson's electronic soundtrack.<sup>4</sup>

*Aria* mirrors the city it was featured in: Las Vegas, epitome of neon signs and glittering facades. If architects learned from Las Vegas in the 1970s, what can artists discover from this city in the new millennium? Steinkamp's intervention is a significant example of an artist's desire to abandon the safe haven of the gallery and dive into a frenzied public space. Swimming through the strong currents of one of today's most highly charged and spectacular public spaces—Las Vegas—puts the artist in direct contact with how the twenty-first-century spectator's identity is being shaped. Artistic interventions in such realms are necessary, yet fraught with risks. The biggest one is to lose agency and become overshadowed by the aggressive commercialism of one's sponsors. But the potential gains are too important to be ignored. The presence of art in shaping postindustrial urban space can only bring subtlety and complexity to an arena that is desperately in need of it. One hopes that such powerful media as the Fremont Canopy continue to be made available to artists in the future.

Leo Villareal is another artist who is creating large-scale light pieces for urban environments. *Star* is an eighteen-foot-diameter sculpture with twenty-four illuminated spokes of light radiating from the center and pulsing in animated patterns. Sometimes these patterns resemble swirling flowers, sometimes exploding fireworks or spiraling tunnels of color. The work plays with both spatial and temporal dimensions as different parts of the display are activated and sequences build over time. *Star* was presented at the Printemps de Septembre Art Festival in Toulouse. The piece was recently reinstalled at the Socrates Sculpture Park in New York City as part of the Winter Light Program, an annual series of light-based pieces that can be seen from the surrounding areas over the winter months. *Star's* proximity to water makes it look like a navigational beacon flashing cryptic messages over the waters of the Garonne and the East River. Its rhythmic patterns seem to convey an undecipherable code that inevitably engages the viewer. We not only try to understand the message but become hypnotized by its flashing presence as we enter a state of altered perception. Villareal himself has stated

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Body Movies*, Relational Architecture 6, Liverpool, England. Photo by Lozano-Hemmer

how his projects become “innovative containers for the further understanding of interactive and immersive experience.”<sup>5</sup>

Villareal is interested in programming life-like behaviors into his devices. This effect was achieved in an earlier piece, *Supercluster*, presented on the facade of P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens over the summer of 2003. Commissioned to cover the scaffolding during its construction, *Supercluster* blanketed the facade of the art center with strobe lights. These lights, placed on a grid pattern, evoke a city map and echo the surrounding urban environment. As the light sequences travel around the grid, they also elicit visions of a computer’s interior mechanisms or the brain’s synaptic sparks—teeming with activity while processing undisclosed information. Trained as a sculptor but with studies in interactive telecommunications, Villareal imbues his technological installations with a physical presence seldom found in new media art. In his work facile readings give way to more open-ended interpretations that jolt viewers both perceptually and intellectually.

Light spectacles have played a crucial role in shaping the identity of the modern citizen. If nineteenth-century shows gave tangible form to imperceptible electrical energy, we still feel a need to visually represent electronic energy, so difficult to grasp because of its slippery and impenetrable materiality. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s *Vectorial Elevation*, Jennifer

Steinkamp’s *Aria*, and Leo Villareal’s *Supercluster* overlay digital space onto urban space. They also allow us to experience digital representations in physical and sensual ways, a process that helps us cognitively map the labyrinthine dimensions of the electronic realm. In this sense they are representatives of a strand of new media art that explores haptic connections to the image. Lozano-Hemmer, Steinkamp, and Villareal present significant examples of how digital technologies can be implemented to help us become more engaged citizens of the electronic era.

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#### Notes

1. Nye, David E. *American Technological Sublime*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994.
2. Quoted in Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989, 309.
3. Images of *Vectorial Elevation* can be found at <http://www.alzado.net/efotos.html>.
4. A Quicktime movie of *Aria* can be found at <http://jsteinkamp.com/html/fremont.html>.
5. Villareal’s artist statement at can be found at [www.villareal.net](http://www.villareal.net).

Night view of the Court of Honor, World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893. Photo by G. Hunter Bortlett  
Courtesy Chicago Historical Society

