

Public Art Review

issue 41 • fall/winter 2009

Public Art
2.0

Media, Technology & Community
in the Interactive City



The Living City

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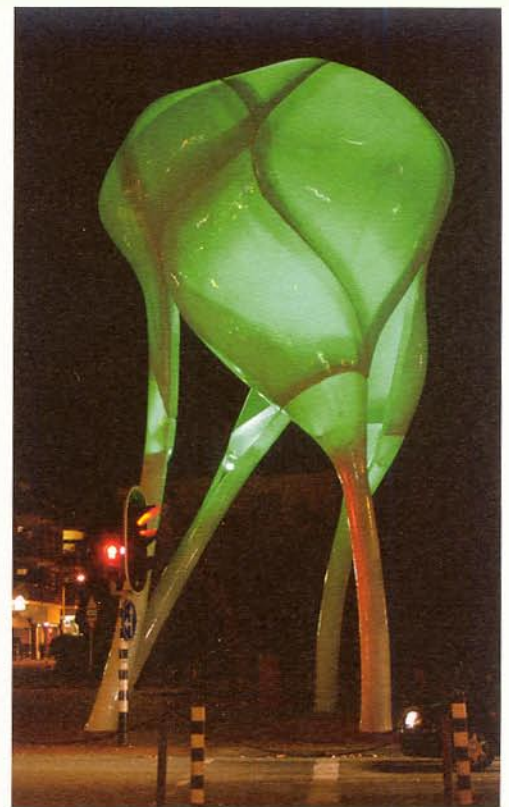
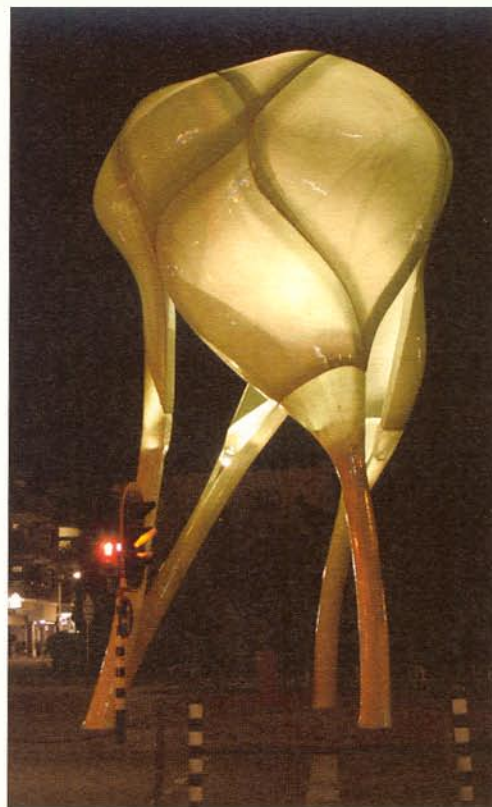
Temporary and interventionist art projects that employ “new media” have increasingly entered the urban realm. More and more cities and corporate businesses take advantage of the attention-grabbing qualities of new media-based public art and invest in projects with a clear social, community-building nature. Permanent or lasting public media art, however, is still something of a rarity and occurs in our cities mainly in the shape of media façades. Even rarer are examples of media façades that incorporate participation or interaction.

This situation provokes a question about the future of new media-based artworks: Can such art—which is often ongoing, changing, and processual, and which relies on a community of users—be maintained on a long-term basis? The city is a living organism shaped by both quick change and permanence. Processes inside this organism progress at different levels of speed and complexity. But even in times of growing mobility, one of the more permanent parts of this organism is the community that inhabits and uses an urban territory.

From this social dichotomy between local identity and mobility springs a desire for sustainable and community-building projects—a thesis that is supported by the incidence of guerrilla gardening. Guerrilla gardening was originally a politically driven, activist reoccupation and redesign of public space through planting and gardening. Since the first public protest of Guerrilla Gardeners in London in 2000, the idea has spread widely and has partly developed into a trendy hobby which today can be observed in many Western cities. Without official approval and bypassing local authorities, guerrilla gardeners are claiming basic rights of free expression and an active role in the individual, environmental, and sustainable design of public space. Along the way, like-minded public actors have created small, local communities and are now connected internationally through Guerrilla Gardening online



ABOVE: Natalie Jeremijenko, *NoPark* (one of a series), 2007, New York City, NY.
BELOW: Chaos Computer Club, *Blinkenlights*, 2001, Alexanderplatz, Berlin.
RIGHT: Lars Spuybroek and NOX Architekten, *D-Tower*, 2007, Doetinchem, Netherlands.



platforms. Artists like Natalie Jeremijenko or San Francisco based Futurefarmers have built an art practice closely related to this kind of urban activism. With their projects they create awareness for the lack of nature in our daily environments and suggest alternative uses of spaces—thus turning the city again into a living ambience.

Although new media are social media in that they foster the formation and proliferation of communities, only a few new media public art projects have emerged from grassroots communities. This may be due to the restricted access to public space and the relative effort it takes to realize a technically sophisticated project. An exception is the famous project *Blinkenlights*, which was initiated and produced in 2001 by the Chaos Computer Club, a German-speaking hacker community. *Blinkenlights* ran over a period of five months on the façade of a high-rise facing Alexanderplatz in Berlin. The building was turned into a huge screen by installing lamps behind the building's windows. People from all over the world could contribute graphic animations and animated text via the Internet, using specially designed free software. Additionally, simple video games could be played on the façade by using mobile phones. Within a short time the Alexanderplatz became a magnet for local observers and contributors, and the vivid online participation spoke for the success of the project, which for the first time created a participatory and interactive community platform in public space. Further versions were commissioned by the cities of Paris and Toronto.

An important factor in such projects is the value of participation to the participants themselves. With the *D-Tower* in Doetinchem, Netherlands, a risky attempt was made to implement a permanent participatory media sculpture that monitors the changing emotional states of the community's inhabitants. The tower glows at night in one of four colors denoting fear, love, hate, or happiness. Every six months, a group of residents is selected to influence the daily changing

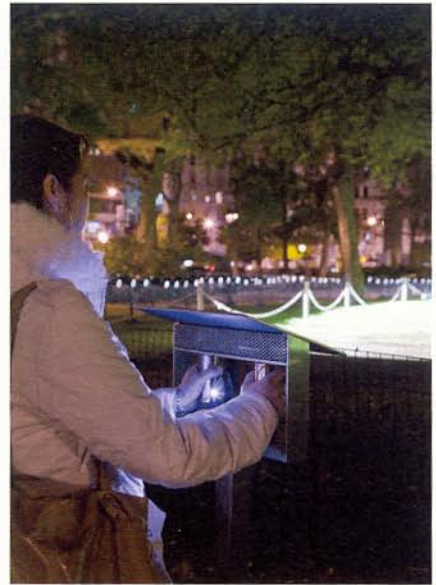
color by answering a questionnaire. The answers are automatically evaluated and the prevailing emotion defines the tower's appearance. The tower, a heart-shaped form derived from experiments with plastic balloons and adhesive tape, has operated for nine years. A factor that certainly contributes to its longevity is the feeling of responsibility on the part of participants, who experience themselves in a new role: as voices of the community and as individuals shaping the shared space of their town.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Relational Architecture series works on the same principle, but until now his works were only installed temporarily. One of his recent projects, *Pulse Park*, which happened in 2008 in Madison Square Park, consisted of 200 spotlights arranged in an oval shape. Visitors could record their heartbeat, which was translated to the pulse of one spotlight. To leave a trace of one's own individuality, a piece of oneself at this place and see it merged into a shared aesthetic experience was the basic idea of *Pulse Park*. Given that urban life is increasingly anonymous and that contemporary society is ever more alienated from physical space, *Pulse Park* offered

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participants the rare sensation of experiencing themselves as individuals as a visible part of a larger, public community.

If art in public space is to create a strong connection between a space and its users, it must be process-based, responsive, interactive, or participatory. New media is uniquely suited to move us beyond the historic monument, as it centers on the human individual acting within a social group—hence, according to the principles of democratic society. The contemporary process-based monument mirrors the city as a living organism whose parts are in constant exchange with its environment.



ABOVE and RIGHT: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Park*, 2008, Madison Square Park, New York City, NY. A visitor takes her pulse, which translates into pulsations of light.

Dynamic visualizations of such processes compose another group of forward-looking projects in public space. In February 2008, the vapor emissions from the Salmisaari coal-

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burning power plant in Helsinki, Finland, were illuminated with a high-powered green laser every night for one week. The laser drew an outline of the moving cloud onto the cloud itself, coloring it green, turning it into a city-scale neon sign, which grew bigger as local residents consumed less electricity. The green cloud was designed as an ambivalent icon that stood equally for the environmental harm produced by energy consumption and for the positive effect of the collective efforts to decrease consumption.

The project, called *Nuage Vert*, raised awareness of everyday ecological processes on many levels. First, it served

as a public mirror of one's otherwise invisible and perhaps unconscious actions: the consumption of energy and its impact on the environment and the community. Second, the long-term planning and production process involved numerous stakeholders and contributors, thus creating a sustainable effect on the local community and affiliated groups. Authors of the project, the artist group HeHe, faced the challenge of convincing an energy company not only to provide real-time data about energy consumption, but also to allow the use of one of its factories for the installation. In light of the environmental background of the project, finding a corporate partner proved difficult. Eventually, in 2009, inspired by the success of *Nuage Vert*, Helsingin Energia has been the first energy company in Finland to release a large amount of detailed real-time information about energy consumption in order to draw attention to the need to decrease energy use in the near future.

This transformation of every-day processes, of "urban flows," into dynamic movement and abstract form directs attention to the change introduced to the spatial and social environment. Other examples of such highly performative "live art" include Carsten Nicolai's *Polylit* (Stuttgart, Germany, 2006), which responds audiovisually to changes in the electromagnetic field caused by laptops and mobile phones; and LAB[au]'s *Binary Waves* (Paris, France, 2008), which also responds to electromagnetic changes, as well as traffic.

Without doubt, more process-based, performative installations will appropriate public space in the future. The further development of durable technical systems and sensors supports this trend as much as the growing awareness of our involvement, both as individuals and as a global society, in complex societal, economic, and ecological processes. The variety and grave impact of contemporary crises shows us that we hardly understand these processes. In light of this deep culture shock, it seems natural for innovative contemporary

art to explore territories beyond the safe ground of the final object, the ultimate manifestation of a creative process, and to move to the uncertain territory of unpredictability and successive live generation of form.

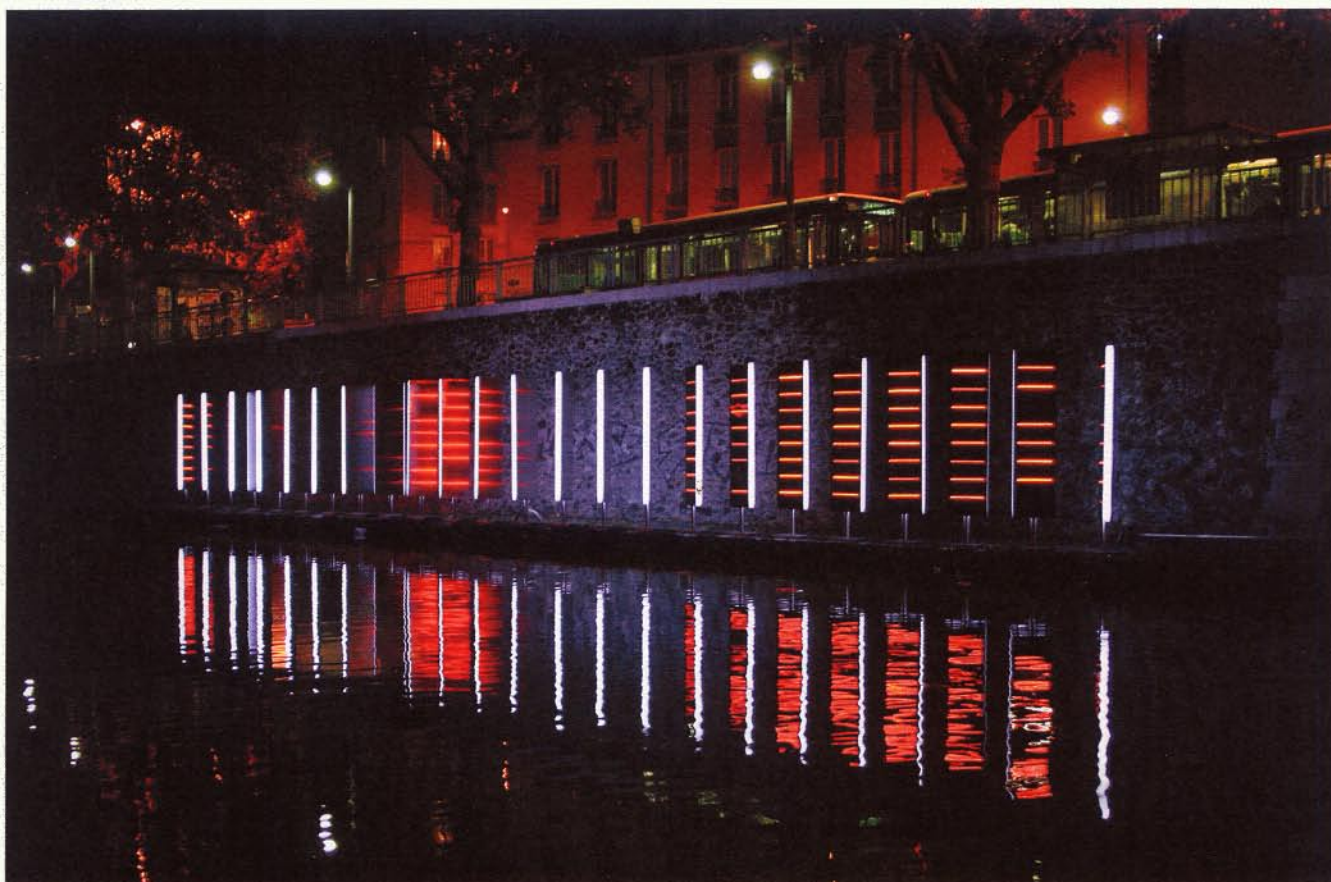
The question remains whether process-based and participatory art projects can make the leap from “moment” to “monument” by integration in the planning and building of architectural space, so that participatory works can be kept alive over generations. The time seems ripe, however, to take this risk, particularly where new communities grow and where new urban areas are under development. With MediaCity:UK, a new development in Salford, Manchester, England, it can be expected that the chance for innovative and community-building public art and media will be taken, since one of the main stakeholders is the BBC, which has been entering public space in the United Kingdom with big public screens [see Mirjam Struppek’s article on pages 46–49 for examples]. Another site, the area of the Europaallee in Zurich, Switzerland, is being developed with art that, in the words of the public art committee, “accompanies the growth of the city and shapes it in a sustainable way in order to generate identity in this urban area.” This objective seems to call explicitly for lasting participatory and process-based art projects.

Although art can only support identity and community-building process in situ and should never be over-functionalized, in the future public stakeholders, administrations, and corporations will hopefully be open to sustainable new media-based installation art. The field is waiting to be explored and calls upon artists and designers to engage in respectful and inspirational dialogue with local communities.

SUSANNE JASCHKO is a Berlin-based independent curator of contemporary art with a focus on art in public space and new media art.



ABOVE: Energy consumption in Helsinki, Finland, as measured by HeHe’s *Nuage Vert*, 2008.
BELOW: Lab[au], *Binary Waves*, 2008, Paris, France.



ABOVE: Photo by Antti Ahonen. BELOW: Photo courtesy the artists.