

Light Attack — Media Art and the ‘Moving Moving’ Image as an Intervention in Public Spaces

Daniel Sauter
Assistant Professor
School of Art and Design
University of Illinois at Chicago
isea@daniel-sauter.com
http://daniel-sauter.com

An interdependent relationship between media artists, architects, and designers has emerged in recent years as a new creative practice in the urban context, with significant cultural and creative potential. This practice, often referred to as media architecture or ‘mediatecure’,¹ ‘responsive environments’,² ‘urban screens’,³ ‘4d spaces’,⁴ or ‘soft spaces’,⁵ has developed during the 1980s and has now become a working model for various architecture and new media collectives predominantly located in Europe and the United States.⁶ The presentation at ISEA 08 addresses site-specificity in the context of urban screens. The site as inspiration, material, and critical venue has been increasingly contested since the 1960s. Public Art and Percent for Art programs like the GSA⁷ and NEA⁸ have defined and redefined their agendas to specifically accommodate site-specific approaches towards art making and reception, actively shaping contemporary public art practice. Especially for practitioners in the emerging field of media architecture, the lessons learned from site-specific public art, their legislative aspects, and their influence on art making and reception should be of genuine interest, as it operates in the same physical and ideological space: the fragmented public sphere.⁹

The terms ‘mediatecure’, ‘responsive environments’, and ‘soft spaces’ imply a kinetic or time-based component within architecture, in practice often realized with a digital layer of programmable light, directly augmented on building, using projection of LED technology. In the urban context, ‘soft spaces’ present anything and everything, including news, cinema, products, and passers-by, simultaneously as celebration and critique of contemporary media society. Diverse interfaces, such as cameras, sensors, cell phones, RFID¹⁰ allow for real-time interaction, with the premise to stimulate identification with a specific site or building. Contrariwise, tactical media as approach that temporarily appropriates mass media (i.e. through hit-and-run tactics and culture jamming) and the architecture of urban spaces, represents an alternative cultural platform for artists, located outside the ‘dedicated’ channels of mainstream and mass media.

As Miwon Know describes in her book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*¹¹, site-specific art has shifted since the 1960s from a) phenomenological aspects of the site, such as scale, topographical, and architectural features to b) social, cultural, and institutional critique, and later to c) discursive practices that employ social, economic and political processes into the creation and utilization of the artwork. This qualitative shift represents a process of ‘opening up’, from a focus on the gallery as space, to audience participation, and direct audience involvement into the production and completion of the work. In this shift, a simultaneous reversal takes place in regards to the role of object, audience, and institution: a) the object as institution, b) the institution as object, and c) the audience as institution.

- a) Focusing on phenomenological aspects, Donald Judd’s work *Floor Box*, 1969, for instance, is concerned with how the sculpture occupies a volume of space. The audience experiences the sculpture, as well as the space surrounding it, as well as their interrelations.
- b) When Walter De Maria fills the Heiner Friedrich Gallery in Munich with dirt (*50 m3 Level Dirt*, 1968) and Mel Bochner marks the walls of the same space with its architectural dimensions (*Measurement: Room*, 1969), the physical condition of the space is the primary point of departure while it also addresses directly the gallery as an institution. Chris Burden targets the art institution literally in his installation *Samson* (1985), using a 100-ton jack pushing against the bearing walls connected to a turnstile at the entrance of the space, each visitor eventually causing enough pressure to potentially destroy the building.
- c) Commissioned by the public art program *Culture in Action*¹², Inigo Maglano-Ovalle collaborates with members of his own Latino community to form *Street-Level Video*, a youth program, in cooperation with a local public access television station. During workshops, the artist works with the participants to create a series of videos that represent their lives and concerns. As part of the public art commission,

Maglano-Ovalle and *Street-Level Video* organized a block party (*Tele Vecindario*, 1993) that included an outdoor video installation, both engaging the local community in the creation of the work, and establishing local institution that is still active today.

How do these concepts apply to artworks created in the context of media facades, and media architecture? In the example of the modern art museum Kunsthau Graz, Austria, the distinct blob-like shape of the BIX¹³ facade display implies the creation of video works that are predominantly derived directly from the building's shape, or, phenomenological aspects of the site (a). In her work *For The City*, 2005, Jenny Holzer projects publicly recently declassified and other sensitive United States government documents onto the Bobst Library of New York University, exploring the problem of achieving a balance between secrecy and transparency. She addresses the library both as venue and institution (b). I'd argue that there are currently no realized artworks created in the context of media facades that have fully and successfully employed a discursive approach, both in the creation of the work, the subject, and sustained effects on the local communities (c).

*Light Attack*¹⁴, a media artwork and social experiment by Daniel Sauter, includes some discursive aspects. The project wishes to illuminate the condition of public life within socially and culturally diverse urban spaces. While driving through the city, an animated virtual character is projected onto the cityscape, exploring places 'to go' and places 'not to go', according to the popular Lonely Planet travel guide. *Light Attack* elaborates the concept of the 'moving moving' image – the projected moving imagery corresponds to the movement through the space while the character's behavior is influenced by the urban context and passers-by. The car's movement through the city determines the virtual character's behavior, utilizing custom computer software that arranges short pre-recorded video loops into seamless motion patterns, allowing for real-time interaction with the architecture and passers-by. Venues and routes are the result of discussions with curators and organizers, culminating in an exhibition at a local art institution, including demographic information. The piece has been performed in diverse cities and neighborhoods, including Los Angeles (USA, 2004), Florence (2005), Boston (2006), Hong Kong (2006), Seoul (2006), and Mexico City (2007).

Based on *Light Attack*, the presentation at ISEA 2008 juxtaposes selected media artworks in public spaces in regards to aforementioned 'site-specific' considerations. Video clips and images of concept proposals and realized projects from the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, will exemplify relevant technological developments in the context of media architecture.



- 1 Term established by ag4 Media Company, 1993.
- 2 Title used by Lucy Bullivant for her book: Bullivant, Lucy. 2006. *Responsive Environments*. London: V&A.
- 3 Term established by the homonymous conference in Amsterdam, 2005, curated by Mirjam Struppek.
- 4 In reference to Lucy Bullivant's book: Bullivant, Lucy. 2006. *4dsocial: Interactive Design Environments*. New York: Wiley.
- 5 Term introduced by Usman Haque, London.
- 6 Well known examples of this kind of practice: Art+Com, Berlin; ag4 media facade GmbH, Cologne; Diller Scofidio + Renfro, New York City.
- 7 Formation of the Art-in-Architecture Program of the General Services Administration (GSA) in 1963.
- 8 Formation of the Art-in-Public-Places Program of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1967.
- 9 As discussed in: Warner, Michael. 2005. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books.
- 10 Radio Frequency Identification
- 11 Kwon, Miwon. 2004. *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press.
- 12 Sponsored by the nonprofit public art organization *Sculpture Chicago*, and directed by the independent curator Mary Jane Jacob, 1991-93.
- 13 BIX is a permanent light and media installation for the Kunsthau Graz, Austria, designed by Peter Cook and Colin Fournier, media façade designed by realities:united architects, Berlin.
- 14 Daniel Sauter: *Light Attack*. http://daniel-sauter.com/light_attack (accessed April 29, 2008).