

LIGHT ART IN PUBLIC SPACE

Titia Ex

Since 1991 light artist Titia Ex, has examined the value of light art in public space: its symbolic significance, referring to spirituality or the triviality of modern society. Light is a transfer of energy, an infinite potential of relationships that permanently engenders new links between things and people. Light can dematerialize public space architecture, where limits only exist on the face of things, and dissolve fixed movement patterns.

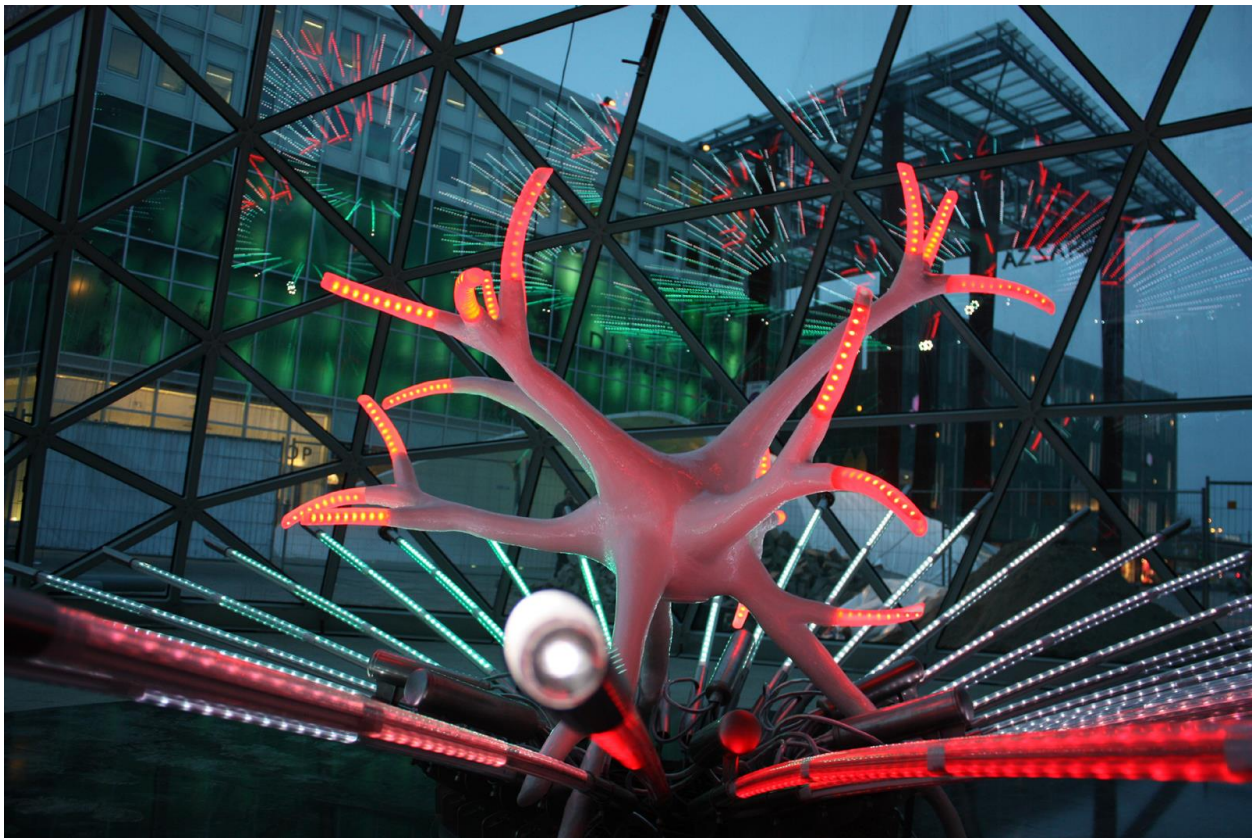


Fig 1. Flower from the Universe, 2010, Titia Ex, interactive light installation, led, diameter 17 feet, photo: Titia Ex.



Fig 2. The Waiting, 2010, Titia Ex, computer animated, led, variable dimensions, Vlieland, photo: Titia Ex.



Fig 3. Halo, 2010, Titia Ex, neon, diameter 13.1 feet, Utrecht, photo: Merijn van der Vliet.

In this paper, I would like to examine the value of light art in public space by focusing on my own practice-based field as a light artist. To me public space is a living organism. Public space is not a saturated or static space but an expanding area. The ever-changing environment has a huge impact on human behavior, on our values and our (inter) actions.

Art in public space can mirror this continuous process of interaction between people and their environment. It can draw the environment from its anonymity and establish different, new and unexpected connections, creating new perspectives on space and time and adding new relational experiences. Light

has a huge symbolic significance: it can refer to happiness, spirituality and enlightenment as much as to the triviality of modern consumer society. [1] Light art includes both artificial and natural light. Light uses time and space as material. It has a presence without presence. It doesn't merely draw attention to itself, it gives visibility to space. Light is a stimulus to our skin, body and brain.

When starting my career as an artist, I produced very short films and looped film installations, sometimes combined with slide projections. The films mostly showed inanimate objects that were a luminous presence in the real space surrounding them. They were an investigation of time and motion, often with the projector light incorporated as a visual element. The 16mm film *Still life* [2] for instance, at first shows a dining table where people have eaten. For moments nothing happens; the spectator is sitting in a dark room, looking at the deserted table, becoming impatient, when slowly the image catches fire. Apparently, you were looking at a flat two-dimensional picture of dinner party leftovers. The flat image is burning down, but turns out to be displayed on a real, three-dimensional table. The moment the spectator realizes what is happening the celluloid catches fire. The spectator remains looking at an empty – light – screen (which then turns into black).

A few years later I exchanged the celluloid surface with its accompanying light source for the transparency of glass, thus capturing the ambient light. I made large mobiles and pivoting screens: door-sized glass panels suspended in wooden frames shaped like full-size mirrors. Slides representing a geometric pattern of green dots, a detail of a plant in black and white or pictures of an empty room, images you look at without really seeing, were projected onto the glass panels. The translucent, satin-finish mobiles, consisting of etched glass discs two feet in diameter, reflected or absorbed the light, according to outside influences such as drafts and light changes. A light switch, a sink drain, a coat rack detail, familiar, everyday things you never pay particular attention to, were silk-screened on the surface in two or three colors. The mobiles created interplay between light, movement and space, both directly and indirectly. The projections on the pivoting screens added another layer to my work. Spectator participation comes when movement blocks the light when standing between the light source and the empty screen. Tilting the glass screen alters the projection and creates a reflection of the image on the wall, floor or ceiling, or makes it disappear altogether. There is no point of focus, no center left, only a continual exchange of stimuli between subject and object.

Working with light in public space is working with movement, transparency and time, all in one. It is a quest to find the rhythm - people in motion, contemplative or en route to somewhere else - and how to apply a poetic echo to this rhythm. The work is always in a dialogue with its physical surroundings and is incomplete without it. It joins the space without being absorbed by it. It makes a natural connection between space, material and viewer. Light has the virtue of reflecting on both the skin of the spectator's body and on the body texture of the environment. It has presence and non-presence. It is what the Japanese call *Ma*: the way to sense the moment of movement [3] or a simultaneous awareness of form and non-form. The word *Ma* essentially refers to an "interval" between two (or more) spatial or temporal things or events. Visitors to an exhibition do not look at *Ma*; they are touched by it and installed in it. The subject-object relationship is deactivated.

The space, the setting and the occupants of the space all supply material for the artwork. In *Musical Chairs*, [4] a permanent installation on top of a round building at the centre of a furniture mall, thirteen computer animated neon chairs in different colors switch on and off in a repetitive pattern. Unlike the children's game, it is the chairs that appear to be dancing; especially at night, when the artwork adds a festive, big city-like impulse to the monotonous architecture of the mall. There is always one chair short

in this dance, so the entire piece only exists in the mind of the spectator, who grasps its shape and character by moving around the building.

The Poet is a Cow [5] is a temporary work on the façade of the Dutch Social Insurance Bank (SVB) headquarters. The work, titled after a poem by the Dutch poet Gerrit Achterberg, consisted of a colored foil layer on a large window, representing an enormous light blue cow's head, a dark blue farmer floating in the sky along with his cow, a red and purple toddler, crawling down the dyke, a green globe with a cow's silhouette on its surface. The image relates to the Dutch landscape, flat and sky high, and the cow is a metaphor for the welfare bank. The colored foil introduced the tension of light in this white, glazed building. During the day the sun projected the image into the main hall and colored the office spaces, until the images disappeared due to passing clouds. The light installation dematerialized the space, the building became the canvas and the sunlight acted as a brush. Visitors to the building became part of the predominantly violet light landscape in the hall, and when using one of the glass elevators they became immersed in the huge cow's head. The intervention of the work very gradually affected the people working in the institution. In time, they discovered that the reflection of the colors also entered the offices, coloring their papers and walls. This "color bath" put their environment in a different perspective. People became aware of the physical light and space, and their own movements, and felt more unified with the architecture and surroundings.

Another example is *Halo*. [6] A permanent light circle, diameter 13 feet, floating above the crest of the lower chapel of the Roman Catholic Church Saint Willibrord in the city of Utrecht. The church was built in 1877, a time in the Netherlands when Catholics were again able to express their faith by building new churches. The entrance is humble, in a residential street with small shops, the church disappears out of sight, is invisible. The work of art establishes a link between the church and its surroundings; the silent gesture taking the church out of its shadow. The circle of light – comprising two neon lines, a golden yellow inner circle and a pure white outer circle – is both dynamic and static, it connects the space to a human sense of history. The intensity of the light in the artwork draws your eyes upwards only to disappear into the black hole, experiencing another dimension of space in the city.

Last year I made *The Waiting*, [7] a site specific, computer animated installation during the contemporary music and art festival *Into The Great Wide Open*. 'The Waiting is the hardest part', is a song by Tom Petty, who also wrote *ITGWO*, the festival's title song. The work comprised forty red LED lights that float just below the surface of a pond and blink randomly, short – long – short. The spectator's close attention was drawn by the continuous random blinking; endlessly waiting for a pattern never to emerge, knowing all was there. The unreadable rhythm of this atmospheric lighting evoked a sense of infinity and a sense of life, an effect that is disconcerting and exhilarating at the same time.

This layered thinking in associations and references is a recurring element in my work. Neither the object itself or the beholder is most important, but the very moment at which everything converges. My installations, computer animation works and video loops seek a balance between this elusive border area at the edge of human thinking and a plain understanding. I wish to create a personal, intimate moment, preferably in a dynamic field of the public domain. This notion is strongly reflected in the interactive light installation *Flower from the Universe*. The installation is always in the present, like a real living, biological plant, [8] unfolding the moment.

Flower from the Universe is a gigantic light flower, seeming to float above the surface, with a heart modeled on a nerve cell, encircled by a garland of graceful stems. A circle of seven pods lies under the heart, and in here the seed of movement is hidden. By walking around the artwork, the visitor sets off a wave

of moving colors. The flower records the colors surrounding it and transfers these to the “petals” - group of stems - into which the garland is divided. Near the borders between the petals, the reflected colors gradually fade into one another. The nerve cell in the heart has illuminated offshoots that follow or are in contrast with the colors in the garland. A dynamic interplay is created with both the viewer and the surroundings influencing the light flower.

This object works using sensors and specially developed software that controls the LED lights in the stems and the offshoots of the nerve cell. Without the external stimulus, the offshoots will switch over to internal control. The principle behind it is physical space. Space as a palette, as a biotope: a living organism. The context changes continually, viewer and light sculpture intermingle and connect, and together are incorporated into a unity of time; there is no beginning or end. _

The *Flower from the Universe* has been exhibited at various locations, [9] including a pond in a botanical garden and the hall of an immense “blob”: an organically shaped glass structure designed by Massimiliano Fuksas. At each location I noticed how people responded to the *Flower* and what impact light can have. Using their bodies, mindful of or attentive to their environment. There is no rational model that allows us to foresee how it feels to play and experiment like this with color. The identity of a color does not reside in the color itself, but is established by relationship. [10] Colors present themselves in a continuous flux, constantly related to changing neighbors and changing conditions. In no reliable sense can we speak of color “as it really is”; it is always determined by its context. A diverse public of all backgrounds and ages were fascinated by the chance color of the moment, became absorbed in the work and mingled with other passers-by. They actively collaborated, interacted with each other, played and blended into their environment.

I like the complexity of working with light in public space. Each context is different, changing the perspective of perception and memory. Light can pass borders; it can fill a space in an instant and be gone the next moment. Light can convey both the dynamics of a space and its tranquility. It can establish an intercourse between several dimensions with a diversity of actors, involving the spectator’s sensory experience.

The Danish light artist Olafur Eliasson works with sensory experience using natural phenomena. He creates an ongoing exchange of stimuli between the visitor and the space. Like *Your rainbow panorama*, [11] 2006-2011, on top of the Aarhus Kunstmuseum, a permanent elevated structure with a 360° view of the city of Aarhus, Denmark. Suspended between the city and the sky, the viewing platform insists on the sensory engagement of those who enter it walking through the colors of the rainbow, from color to color. The USA light artist James Turrell usually encloses his audience in order to control its perception of light and make it lose all sense of space, scale and color, like in the series *Skyspaces*, [12] built at several locations, a number of architectural installations with holes in the ceiling to look through at the sky, meticulously designed in order to heighten the viewer's awareness of light.

The present state can also lodge the past. Currently, I am working on a new temporary project in public space; it is partly virtual and entitled *Walking the Light*. It is about attachment to a place, recollection and transformation. The work draws the public space out of its anonymity and forms different, new, unexpected connections. It will entail walking a light circle in an urban landscape led by virtual light guides carrying torches while telling their stories. It will reflect the public space in a poetic manner, evoking a sense of belonging.

Artificial light is an expanding field bearing innovations within the scope of architecture, health care, and the quest for mobile and sustainable light systems. Light facades; the public space; innovative employment of light as a stimulating impulse to our bodies, in light therapy and brain activation methods; mobile light sources, like LED, making it possible to wear light on the body; and sustainability solutions, allowing spaces to be lit in a cost-neutral way.

Art reflects who we are, and what really matters to us. Light art in public space doesn't begin and end in a physical frame. Light is a transfer of energy, an infinite potential of relationships that permanently engenders new links between things and people. With light you can dematerialize the architecture of public space, where limits only exist on the face of things, and dissolve fixed movement patterns. Public space, not as a passageway, but as the place where life is lived, amidst historical tokens, rediscovering or redefining the environment from a new dynamic perspective. Light art can contribute to the present, to the relational experience of a place, to a general consciousness of being in a public place. The Dutch poet Rutger Kopland interprets this exquisitely as *An empty place to stay*. [13]

References and Notes:

1. Irene Beers, *There is no why in play, works of Titia Ex (publication Flower from the Universe, Ex, 2009)*.
2. *Still life*, 16mm, 1.40 min., Anthology Film Archives, New York, 1991.
3. Heinz Kimmerle & Henk Oosterling, *A Culture of the Inter. Japanese Notions of Ma and Basho* (Würzburg: K&N, 2000), 61-84.
4. *Musical Chairs*, diameter 43 feet, Apeldoorn rd. 2004, (Series Masters of Light, Euromaxx, 2010).
5. *The Poet is a Cow*, solo, 39.4 x 19.7 feet, foil, headquarters, SVB Amstelveen 2005.
6. *Halo*, permanent installation, diameter 13.1 feet, neon, Utrecht 2010.
7. *The Waiting*, variable dimensions, computer animated, led, ITGWO 2010.
8. Arjen Mulder, *To the Flower from the Universe (publication Flower from the Universe, Ex, 2009)*.
9. *Flower from the Universe*, Hortus Botanicus Amsterdam; *Blob*, Eindhoven; *Senkenberg Naturmuseum Frankfurt*, 2010; *Chemistry-Creating new Worlds*, The Hague, 2011.
10. Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*(CA: UCP, 1954/74), 362.
11. Olafur Eliasson, *Your rainbow panorama*, 2006-2011, www.Olafureliasson.net (accessed September 2011).
12. Craig E. Adcock, James Turrell, *The art of light and space* (CA: UCP, 1990).
13. Rutger Kopland, *An empty place to stay & other selected poems*, trans. Ria Leigh-Loohuizen (TPP SF, 1977).