

## THE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL: AN INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION IN PUBLIC SPACE

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While the interactive media become ubiquitous in public space, how it communicates with its site stays as a question. In this paper, an alternative answer is offered by analysing a multimedia installation focusing on how the social components are triggered by digital interaction. Consequently, the importance of social integration and social-site-specificity become apparent as additional components in the design of interactions in public space.



no caption

*"Like all social practice, spatial practice is lived directly before it is conceptualised..." [1] (Lefebvre 1991)*

It was a rainy day in April 2010 in Frankfurt. As one of the most central junctions of the city, Willy Brandt square was crammed with many people who were hastening to their goals. People who were hurrying up to the main station, waiting for their trams at the tram station, waiting in a line in front of the theatre, walking through the opera building at the bank square. Business women, business men, students, employees, unemployed, visitors and habitants of Frankfurt, old people, young people, children...The passers-by of this junction were streaming to the underground metro station as the rain flows to the underground.

A man's shouting was heard at the metro station 'I am Paul Auster! It is not my real name!'. People could not realise what was happening down there. 'You are the baleful one, that maculates the country', the other one answered accusingly. Then a scared young woman stated 'I think... you never had loved'. Then another woman was proud of herself stating that she had a mission there. Surely, people could not understand what was happening at their usual metro station on that day overhearing the loud yells of all these people. After a few steps a light theatre welcomed them at the top of the escalators with the voices of Quinn of Paul Auster, Terasias of Sophokles, Lulu of Wedekind, and Motte of Stockmann under the stage lights.\*

'The Light at the End of the Tunnel' is an interactive sound and light installation, produced by Atelier Markgraph GmbH in collaboration with city theatre Schauspiel Frankfurt, Martin Lighting Professionals and the station managers VGF, for the fifth Light Culture Festival, Luminale 2010 in Frankfurt. The Light Culture Biennale, Luminale, is held parallel to the Light + Building trade fair every two years in the city. [2] It is a creative platform which makes the light professionals and lighting artists, designers, urban planners and architects meet, and gives them an opportunity to illuminate all over the Rhein-Main region collaboratively and innovatively. During the festival, the city becomes an open space to create site specific illuminances. Around 150.000 visitors of the festival witness a colourful ambience around the sky scrapers, on the historical museum buildings, at the public squares and through the boulevards of the city. That is to say, during the Luminale the light becomes a medium to transform the city into an art space creating new visual experiences through it.

Hosting also the city theatre, Schauspiel Frankfurt, the underground station at Willy Brandt square is a meeting point of thousands of people during the Luminale. With four entrances and three floors, it is an intersection of six underground metro lines. Within a human traffic, the passers-by's experience of 'the Light at the End of the Tunnel' starts at the entrance of the station with the voices of the actors from the original theatre plays, and with the guidance of floor markings. After walking through these, at the B-level of the station, people encounter a bright, colourful theatre scene with moving stage lights and an eight-meter-long LED panel. It is a set for passengers and passers-by whose audience are the people driving the escalator. As they move on the stage, they can activate quotes taken from current plays at Schauspiel Frankfurt. By stepping on one of the role markings, a passer-by can trigger the stage lights which spot him, the LED panel which lights the quote of corresponding character of the role marking, and the sound which is vocalized by the theatre player. In this means, a multimedia performance takes place interactively. A quote from a classical play and another one from a contemporary play were embodied by the participants like a conversation. Similar to the stage at 'Théâtre de l'espace'\*\*, 'spectators experienced the scenes juxtaposed with one another, whether in a planned confluence or a chance intersection of sights, sounds, and narrative.' [3] With this interactive setting, a passer-by creates his/her own theatrical narrative by experimenting different roles of this interactive play. Additionally, s/he can be a part of a common performance where the other fellows act on the stage. In both cases, purposely or unknowingly, people, who only pass by, become the actors or the audiences of a theatre play which narrates 'the moment' in this specific public space.

That is to say, it can be claimed that 'The Light at the End of The Tunnel' is nourished with its potentials in enhancing these moments and in triggering social interaction among people. Besides that, it also sustains the social interaction supporting the social function of its public space as a component of digital interaction. It uses light, sound, graphic not only as architectural components but it congregates them via interaction and supports the public content of its site. Beside the regular function of this public space, it provides people an opportunity to involve in creating another social layer in this public space. A metro station, as a place where people only go by, is transformed into a public space where an additional social communication level achieved via multimedia. They pause, they share moments and create their own narratives with fellows or with strangers using interaction. They try to catch the stage light on themselves, jumping on to a classical role from a contemporary one to create an absurd dialog or moving continuously to change the light ambience of the whole room. With the presence of such an interactive installation at a metro station, people become aware of the 'publicness' of this public space that they have already become a part of, and start to construct a new kind of social relation with people around them. It is definitely a physical intervention to their usual, mundane, every day space which creates awareness via attention, participation, collaboration and performance taking place in this public space.

Thus, 'the Light at the End of the Tunnel'\*\*\* becomes also a catalyst to arouse social interaction there. In this sense, this place gains a public layer beside its functionality where people share an experience. In that means, if McLuhan's approach of 'the light as medium itself' is considered, it can be claimed that, 'the Light at the End of the Tunnel' transcends being a 'light bulb' [5] with the communicative exchange with its public. Within a context of a light festival, it intervenes the public space creating a dynamism in social interaction. This is because it is not only site specific in terms of architecture but also site-specific for its social context. With this social-site-specificity, the installation as an 'intervention' in the public space becomes an 'integration' into the public space by stimulating and supporting its publicness.

### **References and Notes:**

\* In this project, ten roles and around fifty quotes from the plays in the April 2010 programm of Schauspiel Frankfurt were selected for the interactive setting. These plays were 'Antigone' of Sophokles, 'Oidipus of Sophokles', 'Das blaue blaue Meer' of Nis-Momme Stockmann, 'Lulu' of Frank Wedekind, 'Stadt aus Glas' of Paul Auster, 'Phaedra' of Jean Racine and 'Geschichten aus dem Wiener Wald' (Anonymous).

\*\* *Théâtre de l'espace* is an experimental space performance by Architect Edouard Autant and actress Louise Lara. In Gray Read's words this experiment 'used theatre to investigate architecture as an art of situation, of placing people in meaningful spatial relationships with one another. Autant designed the *Théâtre de l'espace* to model the experience of an urban plaza with multiple, simultaneous scenes that both surrounded and were surrounded by the audience. Performances juxtaposed fictional narratives, improvisation, and real situations to propose a paradigm for public space in a modern, collective society. Through theatre, Autant and Lara investigated architecture not as form but as action, a practice particularly relevant to design in cities.'

\*\*\*The *Light at the End of the Tunnel* won the prizes iF Communication Design Award 2011 (Gold-Interactive Installations), German Designers Club Award (Silver-Environmental Design/Architecture), Art Directors Club Germany 2011 (Bronze-Events).

1. Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 34.
2. Luminale 2012's official Web Site, "Luminale 2012 Call for Projects," <http://light-building.messefrankfurt.com/frankfurt/en/besucher/events/luminale.html> (May 22, 2011).
3. Gray Read, "Theater of Public Space: Architectural Experimentation in the *Théâtre de l'Espace* (Theater of Space), Paris 1937," in *Journal of Architectural Education* 58, no. 4 (2005): 53-62.
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).