

# Artificial Light

## New Light-Based Sculpture and Installation Art

### Digital Light: Reflecting Life

Kathleen Forde

Every so often, in the evenings, I look out of my apartment window at a Manhattan skyline composed of hundreds of high-rise buildings that seemingly put on a nightly electronic performance. It begins at roughly 11 p.m., as the lights in all the individual apartment windows begin to tick off. One by one, as dwellers retire for the night, the lights die. Left and right. Up and down. Sometimes a few lights switch off in unison. Most windows turn dark. A few glow a diffuse television blue. This unintentionally orchestrated theater of window lights marks the passage of time. Coming merely hours after the sun has made its own exit, it signals the close of another day.

What is it that makes light and its disappearance, the tension between seeing and not seeing, such a seductive thing? Perhaps part of the attraction is that in essence light is a tangible benchmark of our existence. It defines space. It communicates time. And it is a key to the scale of our miniscule position in the universe. Without it, we would not be able to grasp the image of a horizon line on the infinite ocean or recognize the endless space of galaxies, planets, and stars.

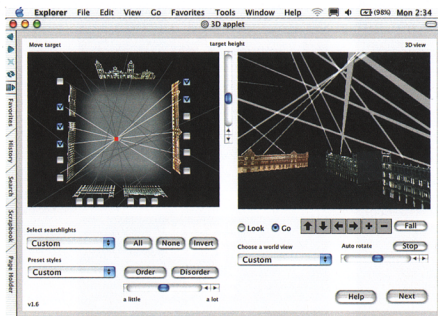
There is something transcendent about light, something magical yet earthly. Paradoxically, it is also often electric. It is this contradictory quality of light, its electric-ness coupled with its relationship to perception, nature, and spirituality, that has led to a resurgence of artists using artificial light as a medium in the field of contemporary electronic and digital art.

Media artists today have mastered technological tools so complex that creating spectacle, the bells and whistles that wow an audience, is no longer a challenge. Many artists are now shifting away from work in which the creative manipulation of technology is the primary message or content. Instead they use technology to explore the least technological concepts of physicality, cognition, communication, and natural phenomena. This essay discusses several tendencies in recent light-based media art and thus forms a context for the artists in *Artificial Light*.

Perhaps one of the most popular applications of light in media art is its use as a surrogate for human presence. A prime example of this strategy is Masaki Fujihata's *Light on the Net* (1996; fig. 1). Via a website that could be accessed on the Internet from any location, Fujihata allowed audience-users to turn on or off any of a bank of forty-nine 20-watt lights in the lobby of Gifu Softopia Center west of Tokyo. From his or her computer the user could see the lights switching on and off, and know that there was a very good chance that people in Tokyo were witnessing

this action as well. The reaction of both the users and the witnesses to this seemingly benign activity pointed to something profound. For the users, the experience of turning the lights on and off was a gesture of power and control. For the viewers in Tokyo, the usually inanimate and anonymous technology became humanized. Ordinary lights signaled the existence of a human being somewhere else, unseen and yet palpably present.

A few years later Rafael Lozano-Hemmer explored a similar theme on a much grander scale in *Vectorial Elevation* (fig. 2), an interactive art project originally designed to celebrate the arrival of the year 2000 in Mexico City's Zócalo Square. The website [www.alzado.net](http://www.alzado.net) allowed any web visitor to design immense light sculptures over the historic center of the city, using an online 3D interface. The designs were rendered by eighteen robotic searchlights placed around the square; these lights could be seen from a radius of fifteen kilometers. A personalized web page was made for every participant with comments, stats, and virtual and real images of their design from three perspectives. In Mexico 800,000 people from eighty-nine countries participated. The project was later shown for the opening of the Basque Museum of Contemporary Art in Vitoria, Spain (300,000 participants), at the Fête des Lumières in Lyon (600,000 participants), and for the EU expansion celebrations in Dublin (520,000 participants).



2

Although the theme of communication naturally lends itself to interactive participation, message-making with light is sometimes presented in a closed system. Cerith Wyn Evan's *Cleave 00* (conceived for the Tate Britain in 2000 and restaged at *Documenta 11* in 2002; fig. 3) rendered the poetry of William Blake as Morse code by means of a computer program. The encrypted poetry was then projected onto an oversized disco ball that fractured the coded "text" into endless slivers of light that danced throughout the gallery space. Blake's romantic poetry was often rooted in the transgressive, cryptic, and prophetic, so this piece functioned on a primary level as a metaphor for Blake's artistic motivations, preserved in the twinkle of the light.

However, as always, our own context frames our understanding of, or connection to, a work of art. Certainly this is the case for a current reading of *Cleave*. We live in a world in which our government is rife with allegations of withheld information, illegal wiretapping, and a variety of other strategies of disinformation. That same government is obsessed with the uncovering of coded information being produced in supposedly enemy regimes. When one views Wyn Evan's piece from this perspective, it takes on broader socio-political implications. For a contemporary Western audience suffering from communication paranoia, this invented cryptography functions on complex levels relevant to the role of encryption in contemporary culture.

Ultimately, the complexity of the light works surveyed thus far lies in the inherent contradictions at play. Media arts are by definition less "human" since they are further removed, by the intervention of technology, from the hand of the artist. We are not looking at a brushstroke, a drawn line, or a sculpted object. Most frequently what we experience is some sort of visual and/or sonic manifestation of digital information. Yet artists who use artificial light as a communication device are



2

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer  
**Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4 (Mexico City)**, 1999-2004  
Robotic searchlights and 3D interface  
Dimensions vary