

Light Art in the City

By Helge Krarup

There are many ways of formulating what light means to us; let me quote the Hungarian artist Attila Csáji:

“About light, which is our life.

About light, without which we cannot live.

About light, which is common like the days of the week;

about light, which is our sacred reality.

About light, which is the subject of research for scientists and technical specialists;

about light, which has been a symbol for thousands of years.

About external and internal light - about the fundamental reason for visibility,

about the source of life.

About light, which is a paradox in itself, which is of dual nature.”

(From 1st International Light Symposium in Hungary, 1996)

Light is a powerful medium that is loaded with meanings: creation and destruction, to see by, to be dazzled by, the sun, the moon, fire, the Creator, consciousness, spiritual, energy, the modern world and much more. It is also a powerful material by being - yes - light and attracting our eyes. It easily drowns out its surroundings. And when light is used along with other materials, a contrast is created between the airy, almost impalpable material called light and those other materials that are solid, reflective or absorbant. Light artists directly address this material, pregnant with meaning as it is.

Artists have always worked with light, by creating a pictorial space in which the reproduction of light helps to formulate the artist's vision; but in paintings, graphics, photography, it is a question of actually reproducing light.

Light artists, on the other hand, express themselves directly through the medium of light: lamps, electric light bulbs, strip lighting, ultraviolet light, lasers, reflection, projection, which are some of the ways in which light is created in concrete terms. The result is not a reproduction of light in the surrounding world, but light constituting and creating the work and its space. Or else light will play its part in creating the work in cases in which the light material is integrated with other materials. A work of light art radiates light.

Internationally speaking, light has been an art form at least since the 1920s; not least since the Lumia works produced by the Danish-American Thomas Wilfred. - With the characteristic use of mixed materials, especially since the middle of the 20th century, the boundaries between the art forms have been transcended.

There are not many light artists: by light artist I mean an artist for whom work with light is the absolute essence. Of course a light artist will necessarily bring in other materials - for instance the mere material that holds the light sources - but the focus in the artist's work is on the light, its nature, its administration; this is the source of the artistic exploration. In addition to light artists there are by now a number of other artists who use light as one material among others.

When we talk of light, we inevitably think of designers who work with light, and the question of the difference between design and art forces itself on us.

Such a distinction can be brushed aside as hopelessly old fashioned and irrelevant, but when it comes to the point, we do tend to make a distinction between the two areas of art and design, and not least artists and designers themselves point this out. It relates to the fact that art is created on a freer basis than design, which has

a practical purpose. Design incorporates artistic solutions to practical undertakings, whereas in a work of art the multiplicity of layers is undoubtedly greater, simply because the artist as a person is solving a problem that has no functional purpose; the aesthetic intention is the crucial element.

On the other hand, the works of designers concerned with light are physically more durable. Works of light art are often fragile and in addition are complicated to maintain, and it must be admitted that some of the - few - light art works in public places are partly or entirely out of action!

The works presented under the auspices of Lux Europae are all placed outdoors in a city environment. The organisers have indicated a number of possible sites, and the artists have chosen the site they favour, in most cases during research visits to Copenhagen. The sites were in the City area of Copenhagen, between the Lakes and the harbour, and Copenhagen's location by the water, with a harbour, canals and lakes, has appealed to many of the artists. Here, the reflection of the light in the water can be introduced. A case in point is the Austrian Waltraud Cooper's "Light Raft", which is placed on the water; from the Peblingesøen lake it will radiate light signs that appear to derive from a secret language.

Lux Europae will activate all four elements: earth, water, air (the sky) and fire (light); in some of the works will also make use of the fifth element: time.

It is a liberating experience with Lux Europae finally to see another application for light in the cityscape, where light is otherwise determined according to function, work or advertisement. We see the lights of the city shining from the windows of the houses; we see them providing information or controlling traffic; we see them in the form of advertisements and lighting for shop windows and commercial head offices, or as a way of drawing attention to monuments and historical buildings. Or they might be for the illumination of public squares where the last 15 years have seen an increasing focus on the significance of light for creating the space represented by a public square, and for which architects and light designers have been responsible. While Lux Europae is taking place, we shall also have the Christmas decorations, which during the dark period of the year include electrically illuminated fir wreaths above streets in the city centre. The time of year has been well chosen for the event: the dark days of autumn and winter.

With the lights of the city as their background, these works enter into a kind of competition for light-awareness. Will they drown in the general shimmer, or will they stand conspicuous and filled with meaning?

Neon tubes and lettering are used for advertising. In relation to the dazzling stream of words in advertisements, the Polish artist Izabella Gustowska's phrase in neon lighting, "Life is a Story", the Belgian Danny Matthy's city names on the Stork Fountain and the Dutch artist John Kömerling's words on the Politiken illuminated newspaper will provoke a different kind of thought than the customary "Buy this product".

When permanent decorations are made for buildings or sculptures are erected on public squares, it is always necessary to decide on the relationship between the work and its surroundings. Do they form a balanced relationship as complements or contrasts? Are they positioned without any special thought of the site and its particular character? Are they in glaring contrast and properly speaking inappropriate there? The happiest situation, of course, is when the work forms a

complement or contrast, in other words when it has been created with a clear view regarding its siting.

With the temporary character of Lux Europae, meanwhile, the extent to which the artists have been able to make a closer analysis of the site is understandably enough limited. But during their studies, the artists have made up their minds about the sites and reacted to them, often with very precise statements; quite frequently, they have chosen a historical building or an important public square, to which they provide a response.

"All the potentials are very inspiring. But there is no reason to decorate them - they are beautiful enough in themselves. So I must find an expression which instead can set my thoughts and those of the viewer working," said Kristaps Gelzis from Latvia during his research visit; he places lights in a series of glass-covered holes in the pedestrian street, Strøget, so that light surprisingly radiates upwards from the surface of the street, in contrast to normal street lighting, which comes from above.

As invisible participants, the event has had authorities and the owners of buildings, sets of regulations and legislation, and in the special case of this exhibition - which takes place during the Danish presidency of the EU with all the related high-level meetings - police demands for security have also been taken into consideration.

The organisers have worked a great deal on this aspect. There are many regulations directing the traffic both in streets and squares, in the harbour and in the air space above the city, with the big international airport of Kastrup nearby. All sites had to be approved by one or more of the authorities. This has, of course, nothing to do with censorship of art, but with practical considerations. At the same time it underlines the fact that the functional part of the city lights constitute a regulatory sign language, and the light works must not interfere with this "conversation".

The light works are dependent on their surroundings and at the same time help to redefine them. The city space is so to speak the light artists' canvas.

Historically speaking, sculptures and monuments in the city have paid homage to the power of royalty, the church and the military. These days, permanent works of art are placed near the buildings representing the powerful factors in a democracy and the head offices of financial or industrial undertakings. Thanks to Danish legislation concerning support for the arts, they are also situated near residential areas and institutions.

Under Lux Europae, the sites in this sense were freely chosen; the works were of course not commissioned to underline a business undertaking or institution; the artists have not needed to reflect the position of a patron.

The artists use their works to make things visible by pointing them out. They awaken positive wonderment, or they add something new to what is well known to us who move in the city every day.

The Icelander Adelstein Stefansson thus points to an absence: Above the ruins of Jarmer's Tower, he uses shining fibre optics to revive the outlines of the tower that formed part of the defence structures around the medieval city.

Yannis Bouteas from Greece places a gleaming tube with text in a colonnade near Christiansborg Palace and thus creates a tension between architectonic and geometrical shapes.

Lone Høyer Hansen from Denmark adopts the newly established open square in front of Thorvaldsens Museum. Here, she "plants" some steel flowers that are brought out one after the other by means of a programmed, moving projector spotlight. Høyer Hansen writes in her introduction that a city must be able to "provide space for reflection, consideration, day-dreaming and being lost in reverie", which applies to all the artists' works.

Danny Matthys from Belgium bases himself on personal experiences in Copenhagen in the 1960s, when the centrally situated Stork Fountain was a meeting place for the youthful rebels. He has chosen the fountain as the centre of a work that also brings in the surrounding buildings. On the fountain itself he uses neon tubes to bring out some of its shapes; round the square, geometric shapes in coloured neon tubes mark out an imaginary space. The names of cities - Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen - written in neon on the fountain are part of Matthys' personal story, but they were also important localities for the student rebellion.

Izabella Gustowska from Poland places green lights in the two royal pavilions at Nordre Toldbod, which are used when the Queen is to sail on the royal yacht, and she brings out these historical buildings while at the same time transforming their functions as they now become the central feature in her work.

Gustowska uses the symbolical value of the pavilions, their ceremonial status, and changes this status for a while. At the same time she places the words "Life is a Story" in neon lettering on the harbour building behind, whereby the entire area is drawn in as part of the overall work.

In the case of a painting or a sculpture it is possible to measure a work's physical dimensions. In the case of light works, the physical boundary is more diffuse: the work is encompassed by the span of the light. Projection brings in both the light source represented by the projector, the beams' path to the reflective surface and the light radiated by this surface. - In Gustowska's case, a triangular field is drawn between the two pavilions and the neon lettering on the façade of the building. In the cases of Lone Høyer Hansen and Danny Matthys, the entire square is incorporated.

Strange things happen, visually, when light is projected on to a house. The three-dimensional structure becomes flat in a way, and the two-dimensional element is underlined. The façade becomes the surface of a picture sustaining the projected image. When we design the permanent illumination of a building, for instance the Law Courts in Nytorv, we often underline its sculptural character; it is to stand as a monument. On account of the shadow effect, the illumination of the colonnade by the Law Courts dramatically brings out the three-dimensional character. It is different in the case of projection on to a building making it the vehicle of the artist's image.

By means of projection, the Croat Goran Petercol has turned the notion of dimensions and angles upside down in many of his works and thereby created a basic surprise. With his projection on to the historical sheer legs, he turns it into a two-dimensional vehicle for an image and thereby transforms its character: He projects an image of the front of the crane structure on to one of its sides.

Helene Black from Cyprus makes use of a large gable end in Jarmers Plads. On the one hand, four cruciform relief figures are fixed up on it: beneath each figure there is a neon tube that creates a kind of halo around the figures. In addition, changing images are projected on to the wall with the same fundamental shapes as the reliefs. The cruciform shape was inspired by archaeological discoveries in Cyprus: a woman carrying a man. The changing pictures build further on this

theme, whereby a characteristic motif from the pre-history of Cyprus is transplanted to a modern city far to the north.

Painting is static; the image is fixed. On the other hand a light work often has a time dimension, if no more than the moment of lighting and being extinguishing. When extinguished, it is a potential about which one can only guess and which is activated on being lit. But in addition it can be composed in time by means of a rhythmical development of the light sequence or tension between two elements in the work which are separately extinguished or intensified and subdued. This brings about a change in focus and weighting, balance and position. This dynamic time element is one of the essential potentials of light art.

The Hungarian light artist, Attila Csáji, projects a video recording on to the front of a house in the centrally situated square, Kultorvet. We see a wax candle burning down, and on the repetition of the video suddenly being re-created, burning down, being re-created and so on. It is debatable whether it is light art or video art; but the artist has chosen an ambiguous solution: the candle and Christmas time, the contrast in size between the candle and the front of the house, the contrast between the material and electric projection of the motif, the expectation that the candle will burn down and then the surprising re-creation.

Light can also create a poetical atmosphere as in the work of the Slovenian Tanja Pak. Pak is a glass artist, coming from a family of glass blowers, but she has expanded the medium by introducing light. She hangs up 75 glass globules with light under a bridge, thus creating a poetical space. The positioning of this work is an example of the contention between work and traffic; it was to have hung under one of the Copenhagen canal bridges, but as barges sail on the canals all year round, it was necessary to find a bridge in a park, in this case the Ørsted Park.

The German artist Micha Kuball's light gateway "Public Katharsis" at the Parliament Square also encountered problems in its positioning. The idea is that people who are to enter a House of Power must walk across a ramp and through this gateway of light, as a symbolical act of purification; several of the sites Kuball wanted turned out to be impossible.

A similar passage of light is used by the Dane Martin Erik Andersen, who erects a 12-metre-long pavilion on the pavement of the Queen Louise Bridge. The five light fittings in the pavilion constitute a sequence of various types of light, from coloured to ultraviolet, through which pedestrians quite literally walk through.

The dimensions of the works vary enormously. At one end of the scale: Four monitors with shots of the rickety Ignalina atomic energy power station, a political commentary by Aida Ceponyte and Valdas Ozarinskas from Lithuania, where the viewer must come very close in order to see this home of a dangerous kind of energy. Or the Norwegian Lars Ramberg's even smaller phototherapy lamps, which are placed on the counter of a various of sausage stalls; the lamps each contain a written text selected by agreement between the artist and the stall-holder concerned.

And at the other end of the scale the Slovak-Danish Viera Collaro's "Messages of Peace", three coloured columns of light projected into the sky by powerful searchlights. Is this an invocation? Or is Collaro turning our gaze to the infinite space above us? Positioned near the waterfront at Christiansholm, they will emit a

powerful sculptural form, visible from many places in the city and constantly being changed by the weather conditions.

In the same way, the effect of the Italian Gabriele Amadori's coloured illumination of one of the huge windmills at Lynetten will be influenced by the character of the air. He is specifically pointing to the use of renewable energy and emphasising the sculptural shape of the windmill.

As can be seen from these examples, there are other dimensions to the use of light in addition to the expressly visual and the immediate fascination with light, which of course is always present in works of light art.

As they pass by, many people will be surprised and ask themselves: Hey, what was that? Surely that wasn't there before? Was it a UFO landing on the roof of a building and emitting cryptic signals? No, it was the Estonian Anu Juurak's sculpture on top of the bus-terminal at the City Hall Square. And when the exhibition period has finished, people will be saying: What has become of that? Presumably and hopefully with a good deal of irritation.

The concrete experience of the many light works scattered around Copenhagen as part of Lux Europae 2002 will, I hope, open up the possibility in the future of introducing light artists to a greater extent when works of art are being considered for open spaces in the city.

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