

LIGHT IN HUNGARY

by Helge Krarup

Since 1993 The International Kepes Society in Hungary has held international symposiums about light art and technology. The 8th symposium took place in July 2010 in the city of Pécs. The International Kepes Society is named after the Hungarian artist, designer and writer, Georgy Kepes.

The Bauhaus-school was founded in Germany in 1919 and closed down by the Nazis in 1933. Some of the teachers – among them the Hungarian Laszlo Moholy-Nagy – came to the USA, where the school continued the work of combining art, science and technology. Georgy Kepes founded Center for Advanced Visual Studies, CAVS at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT in Boston in 1967, which in many ways continues the philosophy of the Bauhaus-school. In 1993 the Kepes Society was founded in Hungary, which in the same spirit joins artists and scientists at symposiums on light art every other year.

Outstanding Hungarians

The leading historian within art in new technologies, Frank Popper told me in an interview many years ago, that one of the two fathers of light art was: Thomas Wilfred, born in Denmark as Richard Løvstrøm. Wilfred worked from the 1920's in the USA creating a pure light art, independent of music or the like, an art he baptized, Lumia. His Lumia-works stands as the basic form for the part of light art that creates pictorial works. The other forefather was Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, who with *Lichtrequisit*, 1930 created the basis for sculptures of light and movement, lumino-kinetic works, that involves all of the actual location, with light and shadows projected onto the walls of the entire space.

In the combination of art and technology there have been many other important Hungarians: Nicolas Schöffer, who since the 1950s made lumino-kinetic sculptures, that reacted on input from the environment. Victor Vasarely worked with optical phenomena. Vera Molnar made a name with computer art, Joseph Kosuth in conceptual art and Gabor Body in video art. Also relevant in this connection: Denis Gabor invented holography, and John von Neumann laid as mathematician the basis for construction of the computer.

The participants in the symposiums are artists utilizing the newest technologies for creating light art, laser art, holograms, kinetic art, robot art and much more – the kind of works we seldom see in Denmark. Furthermore scientists and art historians. This time in Pécs there were participants from 12 countries, many were Hungarians, living outside of Hungary. During the 20th century Hungary has been violently reduced in area, in fact by 2/3!

Light Show

I have participated in the three former symposiums, where I have spoken about Danish light art. This year I showed slides of wet slides, that were used in the light shows from 1960s

and on. It was slides from Danish light shows; I have myself been member of such mixed media groups. Around 1970 there were pretty many of them in Denmark, also seen in an international perspective. A number of the light artists were quite happy about my presentation, since they themselves had tried out the light show-format in their younger days.

My theory is that wetslides represent a genuine contribution to the art of light: Colour is smeared onto small glasses for diapositives, which are put into the projector, the heat of which makes the colours move and literally boil, and thus the image evolves (also by adding chemicals). The very source of light is therefore an active factor in creating the wet slide. The American art historian, Joe Ketner pointed out, that since the end of the 50s and into the 60s, multimedia or mixed media works were combining music, theatre, film and visual art. Ketner showed how Andy Warhol's famous Exploding Plastic Inevitable-performances with the Velvet Underground-band were strongly inspired by the German light artist Otto Piene, who then began working in the USA. Thus Ketner and I supplemented each others, unintentionally.

There were many such cross references, and it was clear to see, that the strong, experimental and groundbreaking art of the 1920s still is a source of inspiration, Just as the 1920s was for the experimental art of the 1960s.

Science and Art

Art and science have links but are of course not the same or alike. Artists are more often interested in new ideas in science, than scientists in new art – it seems. Thou – as the Hungarian physicist, Norbert Kroo mentioned – creativity is more and more in focus within science: No science without beauty!

Waltraut Cooper from Austria took part in Lux Europae 2002, an exhibition of light art in the streets of Copenhagen. She studied mathematics, music, physics and art. For her, mathematics deals with bringing clarity into the world – the same could be said of her own artistic work. A series of works she called Digital Poetry, not that it had to do with written poetry, but she chose the word of poetry for these computer based works because many people are afraid of what the world of the computer can lead to. Combining the two words she wanted to say: The use of the computer depends on us human beings, who can use it for the better or for the worse.

Spiritual and Concrete

Light art can also be shaped with natural light, the Hungarian sculptress Marta Kramli talked about that, thus in land art-constructions. Often this kind of construction lets the passage of the sun over the sky filter onto the walls of the construct. In an extreme form in James Turrells gigantic work where the audience will be placed at the bottom of an extinct volcano, the circle formed top of the crater forming a window facing the sky, in a kind of dialogue with the universe. - There is an outer, physical reception of light, so to speak, and an inner: the spiritual dimension in light, that many light artists involve. And that

older forms such as the Stonehenge, Pantheon, the glass paintings of the churches demonstrate.

Eva Bortnyik and her husband, Csaba Tubak create very beautiful work, where the concrete and spiritual are combined. They work in black and white and project video with optical, geometrical figures onto a surface, often white columns or a tube that rolls up and down in front of the projection area. By this they create beautifully calm images, simple forms that create very complex pictures, very sensual and at the same time thought provoking, geometrical forms that become emotional and poetic.

Colour, Light and Sound

Many light artists have sought for a correspondence between colour and musical tones. That is part of the prehistory of modern light art in the 18th and especially 19th centuries. The aforementioned Thomas Wilfred broke with this analogy and created works of light art entirely independent of music. Also in the experimental cinema of the 1920s there were illustrations of music in abstract pictorial forms, for instance by German Oskar Fischinger, who worked in the USA and American Mary Ellen Bute, who in fact had been an assistant to Thomas Wilfred. Characteristically, she called her film genre, Seeing Sound. That kind of pictorial illustration of music can result in quite bombastic forms and rhythms, but also in exciting and free works of art. The aforementioned light show is by the way is a projection of slides, wet slides, films, theatre light etc to live music, so as such light show lies within this track of light art.

Architecture and the City Scape

The city is if anything defined by light. A number of light artists create in the light of the streets and city space. German Michael Bleyenbergh make holograms that change as the spectator passes by. He considers his work as catching the light or building with light, for instance in tall columns of holograms integrated in architecture. The American John Powell participated in the large Lumia Exhibition in Copenhagen, 1999 – named thus to honour Thomas Wilfred. Powell creates light for public spaces in Boston, among other things by projecting light on bridges. He has been developing special LED-lamps and other kinds of projectors, that don't use much power. The light is sometimes programmed to create a kind of story, such as the light on a bridge that interactively reacts to the number of persons who have passed over the bridge. As he said, city councils are very happy about light on facades, places, streets and such, so there are many opportunities for light artists in that area!

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