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Introduction: sensing and perceiving with light and dark

The award of the 2001 Turner Prize to Martin Creed's work, *The Lights Going Off And On*, attracted considerable opprobrium from within the British media. The event, they lamented, epitomised a detached, elite art establishment willing to reward work that required little thought other than a desire to outrage and shock. An alternative perspective, however, focuses on how the work, which simply features an empty white room in which a light is turned off and on every ten seconds (Martin Creed, work no 227), brings out the sheer sensory distinction between an illuminated and unilluminated space. The transformation of such an ordinary space by artificial light, now a wholly mundane aspect of contemporary life, would have initially been enthralling during those years when first gas, and then electricity, transformed the nocturnal world from one primarily experienced as dark to one thoroughly colonised by bright illumination. We now neglect this; the everyday miracle by which electric light is deployed to utterly transform the ways in which a room is perceived and sensed.

Though particularly expressive of the distinction between light and gloom, Creed's work is one amongst many creative approaches that constitutes a through-going, longstanding engagement with light by artists. This breadth was partially reflected in the 2013 *Light Show* staged at London's Hayward Gallery (Lauson, 2013), which though inevitably selective, signifies the emergence of a greater awareness about the potency, multivalency and potentiality of light - and indeed, darkness - to address a wide range of contemporary issues about experience, sociality, space and place, affect and symbolism. Accordingly, this special issue explores a range of contemporary artistic approaches that particularly focus on sensation and perception. To contextualise the six papers included here, this introduction foregrounds some of the key ways in which light has been deployed by artists and teases out some of the central themes investigated.

The ways in which we usually apprehend light - as a quality of daylight, season, time of day and place; as bright, dim, glaring, glowing, animated or saturated; as a beam through which to discern the way ahead; as an attractor in spectacular displays or advertising; as a functional utility to illuminate homes, stadia, streets, shops and workplaces - are rarely considered except when we witness forms of light or darkness that are beyond normative experience - or when we encounter works of art. Surprisingly, across the humanities and social sciences, there have been few substantive contemporary accounts of the ways in which lighting and darkness can express meanings, or transform space in multiple ways. There are few theoretical accounts about effects of light and darkness on the sensorium, and little consideration of their emotional and affective power. A brief consideration highlights how luminosity, colour, saturation, tint, animation and shadow can make a deep impression on apprehension, mood and atmosphere. Such qualities seem so

ordinary that we rarely question their impacts or meanings, yet following Jacques Rancière (2004), we might consider how the ways in which the world is illuminated forms part of the distribution of the sensible. All the papers in this collection interrogate normative ways of apprehending the environments in which they occur, revealing how artists solicit attention towards that which may usually be overlooked.

Artistic uses of light can address profound questions about the qualities of places, spaces and landscapes. In addition, they may examine how spaces are perceived, symbolic meanings inhere in forms of illumination, and the affective and emotional resonances provoked by light that cajole bodies into movement, activate passions and instigate sensual pleasures and discomforts. To gain some purchase on the diversity of such deployments, a discussion of the ways in which artists use light to celebrate or defamiliarise place precedes a brief account of how others produce immersive environments and interrogate perception, before a focus upon vernacular creativity and illumination.

Site-specific installations: Deepening and defamiliarising place

Some artists work with and expose the powerful sensual and affective qualities of the natural light and its interplay with the landscape in which works are installed. For example, Anish Kapoor's *Cloud Gate* in Chicago's Millennium Park, a gigantic, perfectly polished stainless steel bean-like structure, reflects and distorts the large skyscrapers, the park and the sky across its curvilinear surface. The 400 stainless steel poles arranged in a grid pattern across a remote area of New Mexico that constitute Walter de Maria's *Lightning Field*, are starkly revealed when hit by the brilliant sunlight at dawn and late afternoon, animating the landscape and its undulating quality as revealed by the even plane formed by the tops of the poles. The frequent lightning strikes in the area attracted to the poles augment this experience of light. In this issue, as Tim Edensor discusses, the Skyspaces of James Turrell articulate the shifting qualities of the light at the sites at which they are installed. The *Glass Garden* discussed by Joni Palmer similarly reflects, absorbs and distils the light of the New Mexican landscape, in contrast to Gregory Markopoulos's film *Eniaois*, detailed by Elena Papadaki, which foregrounds the non-visual qualities of the crepuscular landscape.

The distinctiveness of place may be differently underscored through the artistic deployment of computer programming to display patterns of light that disclose usually ignored rhythms. As Pierre Auboiron (2010) details in his discussion of the work of Yann Kersalé, the strength of the red lighting on the roof of the Lyon's Opera House alters in response to the levels of human activity inside the building as it is recorded by sensors and cameras, revealing an 'inner phenomenology', for instance, during night rehearsals. Similarly, Kersalé's arrangement of translucent rods sited in the garden of Paris's Branly Museum are connected to the database of a nearby weather centre and programmed to react to the surrounding temperature, turning the

thick vegetation white when it is cold, pale blue when mild and intense turquoise on balmy evenings. And in 2013, at the Convention Centre Plaza in Minneapolis, MIMMI (Minneapolis Interactive Macro-Mood Installation) was installed, a large inflatable light sculpture that reflected the mood of the city as ascertained by local tweets and movement on the plaza.

Other artworks underline the significance of iconic sites. At Sydney's *Vivid* festival, each year a different light artist projects designs onto the city's Opera House, some referring to historical events, some 'dematerialising' the building, providing illusions that it is crumbling, melting or freezing over. These latter practices also exemplify how artists seek, by contrast, to defamiliarise place in various ways: by making familiar sites look and feel strange, by disrupting ordinary and habitual practices, and by revealing the usually overlooked features of place. Such strategies are particularly significant in the works discussed in this issue. Johanne Sloan discloses how Paris was made temporarily strange through the effects produced by Michel de Broin's giant suspended mirror ball and how ordinary shopping was transmuted into a magical event by Wepler and Mahovsky's *All Night Convenience*, and Elena Papadaki demonstrates how walking through Trafalgar Square was disrupted by the techniques utilised by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer to solicit unexpected ways of sensing this very public space.

In addition, imaginative uses of light can also summon up other times and places, taking visitors away from the here and now. Sloan discusses how Phillip Parreto conjures up a sense of nostalgia for the movie theatres of yesterday, the illuminated awnings he installs in various settings, honouring the lavish palaces of entertainment and fantasy that were so important in transporting cinema and theatre goers away from their everyday lives. Similarly, while the light projections at the Australian National University discussed by Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Barns rekindled memories of nationally significant events, they also featured sidelined, unofficial occasions of university life.

Both the production of a sense of place and defamiliarisation resonate in Chris Burden's *Urban Light* sited outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The installation comprises a dense, regular geometric grid arrangement of 202 restored street lamps of the 1920s and 30s from Southern California. The installation conjures up a vanished world of public space and a street vernacular that has been eclipsed by lighting functionally devised to facilitate the speedy transit of motor vehicles on Los Angeles highways. It has also re-enchanted the plaza in front of the museum, providing a convivial public space in which newly married couples pose for photographs, fashion shoots are held, kids play, tourists congregate and teenagers hang out.

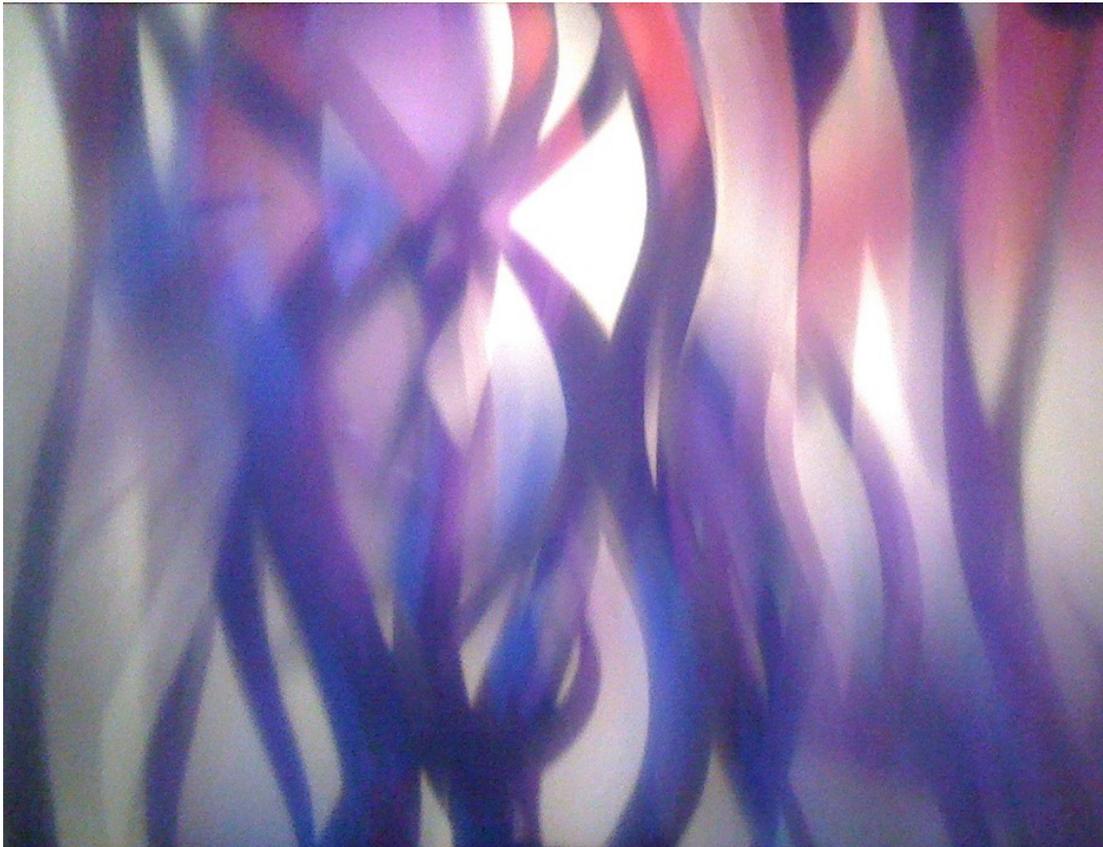


Engaging participants: Interactivity and immersion

Burden's piece is so effective because it induces a seething venue of interactivity on the often deserted streets of Los Angeles. Accordingly, many contemporary light artists are keen to foster a sensuous interactivity. This was particularly exemplified at Sydney's 2014 *Vivid* festival where designers concocted ways to encourage people to dance with light, clap and laugh and sing to encourage responsive patterns, experience their likenesses cast in space, and manipulate the design of buildings and bridges. The excitable responses of adults and children to an accumulation of attractions in close proximity stimulated an often intense festive and convivial atmosphere that transformed the usual apprehension of place, deepening a sense of connection and widening the parameters of public performance (Edensor, 2012).

The works discussed in this issue all foster various engagements. Carlos Cruz-Diez's *Chromosaturacion* entices people to move between three colour-saturated chambers, while Tino Seghal's constructed situations require a willing engagement for the piece to work. Similarly, the public works discussed by Sumartojo and Barns Sloan and Papadaki inspire participation and an inclination to loosen conventional inhibitions about performing in public space.

An increasing number of artists have sought to produce immersive environments through which they move away from the representational, and in which the sensual and affective experience of the visitor becomes paramount. Such works devise settings in which those entering them question what they are feeling and sensing. These works also often possess thick atmospheres that are elicited by the deployment of light, water and air, as well as sounds, smells and textures. As with the defamiliarising tactics discussed above, in focusing upon the emotional, affective and sensual potentialities of light, these forms of art are apt to detach the visitor from the habitual experience of space.



An early example of works such as this is *Opus 162* (1967-8) by Thomas Wilfried, situated in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This is produced by Wilfried's 'colour organ', a mechanical box full of orchestrating devices that project a changing array of light effects onto a screen. Wilfried conceived light art as a distinctly expressive medium through which refraction, colour, intensity and shadow could be combined to produce a silent display. Although akin to how a musical composer might use melody and rhythm, the colour organ uses light to elicit moods and thoughts. The immateriality of light was similarly explored by László Moholy-Nagy, as discussed here by Sloan, who was concerned with creating a sense of flux which could transcend the solidity of other sculptural forms, revealing other, vital agencies that continuously shifted shape and colour to maintain engaged participant stimulation (Rycroft, 2012).

More contemporaneously, artists have investigated the affective and sensual qualities offered by light. Olafur Eliasson's famous *Weather Project*, a huge artificial sun installed in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern Gallery, London, provoked visitors to bask in its light, becoming suffused with its glow. In Anthony Gormley's *Blind Light*, a semi-transparent glass chamber lit by fluorescent light and filled with thick clouds of steam curtails vision, the surrounding mist providing little sense of scale, distance or the presence of others until they come close by as murky forms. Other works dazzle the senses by producing immersive visual fields, notably the creations of Chul Hyun Ahn who uses light to convey optical and bodily illusions of infinity, and the art of Sydney based artist Alan Rose (www.alanroseart.com), who updates the effects produced by the practitioners of op-art in the 1960s by deploying light to intensify the effects of these earlier artists, confusing perception and simultaneously inducing meditative mental states through the use of geometric patterns of illuminated colour.

These themes are particularly resonant in Harriet Hawkins discussion of Pipilotti Rist's *Parasimpatico*. Drawing on Luce Irigaray's theories of light, Hawkins shows how Rist's projections challenge masculinist notions of the distanced, discrete viewing subject that authoritatively mobilises vision as a means to describe the world. These highly immersive installations envelop bodies and environment in light and colour, and in moving between abstractions and identifiable image, they foreground a 'haptic visuality' that diffuses the subject-object boundary.

The works of Turrell, Cruz-Diez and Eliasson discussed in this issue are similarly immersive and provoke reflection on the accuracy, even reality of what is being perceived. Similarly, Papadaki's discussion of visitors' realisation that they are seeing the presence of another person in their shadow in Trafalgar Square, jars with habitual ways of seeing. These works also highlight how the experience of light can produce and is accompanied by sensations other than the visual. Papadaki refers to the focus on sounds solicited by the darkness experienced in the work of Markopoulos, and in paying attention to the *Glass Garden*, visitors also become aware of the textures, winds, smells and sounds of the landscape. Barns and Sumartojo focus on the nocturnal context in which projections are experienced, referencing the sounds, temperature and ambient light that together with the subjective and communicative responses of visitors co-constitute illuminated atmospheres. Thus forms of light art also elicit emotional and affective responses as with the glee produced by dancing to the shimmering patterns produced by Michel de Broin's giant mirror ball and the delight provoked by Eliasson's *Model for a Timeless Garden*.

Vernacular

The *Glass Garden* discussed by Palmer foregrounds the importance of also looking at how vernacular forms of creativity are mobilised to produce extraordinary works in light. This creation testifies to a lineage of local design that is ongoing, fostering an

enduring relationship between artists and landscape. Besides the vernacular forms reworked by countless neon artists, other creative examples across the world testify to other innovative ways in which popular and local forms of creativity supplement the work of those designated as 'artists'. The Christmas Lights in Medellin, Columbia are an extravagant collaboration between professional designers and technicians and the people of that city. Effusive and expressive, they radiantly transform the nocturnal environment, producing swathes of shimmering colour to foster a powerful sense of festivity and celebration.



The more modest though still spectacular arrangement of colourful Christmas illuminations on the façade of British working class householders similarly generates a powerful sense of festive occasion, though it is often reviled as tacky by critics (Edensor and Millington, 2009). Smaller scale commemorations, such as the growing number of lantern parades also inspire local creativity in producing inventive, sensual forms of illumination that enchant places and promote conviviality (Edensor, 2014), as do the national vernacular creations produced in national and religious festivals such as Diwali, Loi Krathong and Chinese lantern festivals. In the UK, the foremost example of a large scale local tradition of creating lighting takes place each year at the nation's premier tourist resort, Blackpool, where a local craft tradition produces designs for the annual Illuminations, a two month attraction along the seafront that attracts 3-4 million visitors. Many of these illuminations are brightly coloured and

animated, and make extensive references to numerous aspects of British popular culture (Edensor and Millington, 2013). All these creations augment the sensory experience of place after dark and act to break down notions of cultural elitism of the sort that Creed's work attracted. As with other creations fashioned through the use of light, they reveal the diverse ways in which light can act on our senses and generate moods that span contemplation, play, melancholy and wonder. As the examples discussed in the papers in this special issue articulate, light and dark are rich media for vernacular and professional artists alike to explore symbolic meaning, affective impact and sensory response.

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