



« Axis of Silence » by Sisley Xhafa



« What I Still Have to Take Care of » by Christian Jankowski



« Protect me from what I want » by Jenny Holzer

THE NEON PARALLAX

PUBLIC ART LIGHTS UP THE NIGHT

Towns and cities are doing their best to outdo each other in the imaginative stakes by encouraging avant-garde and media-friendly art projects. Neon lights and billboards are used for something more original than promoting the latest car or the biggest bank. From New York to Seoul and Turin to Geneva, Sur La Terre explores the art projects that are lighting up urban spaces.

TEXT: SIMON LAMUNIÈRE, WWW.ARTGENEVE13.CH
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Giant Screens

Artists took over TV and film in the 1960s and it wasn't until the 1980's that the Public Art Fund commissioned artists' films to be shown on billboards. Keith Haring was the first to take over a giant video screen in Times Square, New York, followed by the American artist Jenny Holzer whose famous phrase «Protect me from what I want» flashed up on a billboard for 30 seconds a day. Few people actually saw this piece and it's only through photos that the phrase has become legendary. It was a world first. Holzer became known for her shock slogans and phrases that used advertising lingo. She outwitted the advertising world and the image of her work has become engrained in our memories ever since.

Times Square has since been covered with screens and is an attack on the senses. A little further away in Seoul, dozens of artists took on the city's many billboards during the Media City Seoul Festival in 2000. The Swiss curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist commissioned the videos spread throughout the city as unique and original windows in a world heavily influenced by the media. Works by Pipilotti Rist, Douglas Gordon, Liam Gillick and many more insinuated themselves into the surrounding chaos by creating contrasts with the urban setting.

Art takes a step aside when faced with or plunged into a noisy setting overwhelmed by masses of advertising. There are too many ordinary art projects in public areas to mention. Rightly or wrongly, these decorative projects adorn squares, halls and buildings. A sculpture here, a sculpture there, rarely in keeping with the setting or the time. Sometimes they can be found on roundabouts, blind walls, tram and subway stations with the naïve desire to embellish or improve the depressing space they're

in. But there's stiff competition. The setting is overcharged with so much information that it's hard for the pieces to exist and be seen.

So nighttime starts to become interesting for art. When you're in a museum, common sense tells us that whatever hangs off a white wall must be art. But when you're in the city, how can you tell what's art? Since the dawn of the readymades and when sculptures were no longer placed on platforms, artists have played with locations and sometimes imitate reality so well that the gap between art and non-art is «infrathin».

The question always crops up at exhibitions or displays in a public space. Whatever the piece or theme, the question of its visibility appears again and again. However, art in public spaces goes beyond these issues as it often relates to giving an area a new look, promoting a building and marketing a city to tourists. Sometimes the exhibition reacts to urban changes such as the «Utopics» in Bienne in 2009 and «Art and the City» in 2012 in Zurich.

Art adds a new dimension to areas and enables us to see beyond the art. Art shows us another side to the world or as the French artist Robert Filliou so perfectly put it: «Art is what makes life more interesting than art.»

Neon lights

When the Las Vegas Strip's lighting began to spiral out of control in the 60s, artists too began using neon lights to create sculptures. The visual power of neon lights harks back to advertising but their formal qualities, flexibility and colour spectrum make them especially appealing. Like videos, they contrast with the traditional lighting in museums. Neon lights are still widely used in contemporary art but unlike painting, they are not a

genre in themselves, but rather one medium among others. A possible means of creating a piece of art. Dan Flavin is the only artist to use neon lights alone as a medium.

Neon lights are one of the inspirations for two enormous public art projects in Europe. The first was the Luci d'Artista in Turin. From 1998 onwards, well-known artists have been commissioned to create pieces to light up the city at Christmas time. Originally retailers asked for the works to bring the streets to life then the project filled out to adorn buildings and squares. Turin's Chamber of Economic Development runs the project. This is both an advantage and a hindrance. Despite major artists such as Daniel Buren, Mario Merz, Joseph Kosuth and the architect Qingyun Ma taking part, the pieces are primarily decorative and the project now seems too dependent on its promotional role.

On the other hand, Geneva's Neon Parallax project is the result of a work group questioning the role of public art and its independence from political and marketing tools. Neon Parallax provides innovations in several key areas and is now one of the world's greatest public art successes. It currently brings together 10 pieces by artists on the roofs of buildings surrounding a square as big as 13 football pitches in the heart of the city. Geneva now has a cultural harbour reflecting Lake Geneva's harbour and its many neon adverts for banks, hotels and watches. The square is diamond-shaped like the harbour and is thus given a new look and improved without looking like a theme park such as Chicago's Millennium Park. Pieces by artists such as Tatsuo Miyajima, Sylvie Fleury, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Christian Jankowski are relatively subtle despite being luminous and each measuring over twenty metres long.



They lie side by side and communicate with each other as if they were in a museum. It's a rare sight to see. Usually a city is so full of signs and things to see that art in public spaces simply melts into the background or looks out of place. But here the pieces both stand out and fit in. They infiltrate the urban area. By adopting the standard advertising codes, the pieces gain incredible visibility without intruding.

These artworks have an incredible impact on the site. There's something new and unusual for passers-by, residents and night owls to see. There are neon signs, artworks that pretend to be something else, strange neon lights that look like adverts that question us but don't provide us with an answer. Art infiltrates the city using recognised codes without unmasking itself. It doesn't have a simple decorative role like Turin's Luci d'Artista. In Geneva, these luminous signs are in your face yet invisible as they seem very ordinary. Think about it, do we really look at advertising in the street or on walls? We notice it when it's garish but there are so many garish messages nowadays that it's difficult to notice them unless they affect our emotions or question us. Influenced by the Public Art Fund projects on Times Square's billboard, these signs show that artists can use the same methods as advertising to create real artwork. In terms of image, the most important thing to remember from these fantastic projects is the quality as this is what makes them what they are. The cities can only promote the culture and tourist activities and reap the economic results that these bring afterwards.

But over and above New York and Turin, what we must realise is that intelligent art can completely change a whole area or the image of a city. Isn't that quite something?

Simon Lamunière is an art consultant based in Geneva who specialises in large-scale public art projects. He is also Director of 2m2 art space and Ardeis editions, President of artgeneve and was, from 2000 to 2011, curator of Art Unlimited, the section for large-scale artworks at Art Basel. For more information, visit www.artgeneve13.ch and www.neonparallax.ch.



Luci d'Artista in Turin photographed by Gianluca Platania



«Fortress of Human Rights» by Tatsuo Miyajima



« Expodrome » by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster



« YES TO ALL » by Sylvie Fleury



Neon Parallax locations



« Breath » by Jérôme Leuba