

Until very recently, Madison Square Park was not an inviting place. Despite its proximity to bustling Silicon Alley, it was notably one of Manhattan's more desolate spots, best avoided at night. Ongoing construction, aimed at eventually improving the park's appeal, actually detracted from it. Still, on a chilly evening last October, people could be found lingering amid the plywood and plastic fencing—and they weren't dealing, or muttering to themselves, either. The sound of muttering could be heard around them, though, apparently emanating from trees and bushes. Those entering the park might have felt that they had stumbled on a reunion of ghosts, an impression supported by the sudden appearance of an enormous disembodied face, suspended in smoke and mouthing mysterious words, like some Gotham version of the Wizard of Oz.

No man behind the curtain here, however. The immediate source of this apparition—a couple of guys manning a video projector and a smoke machine—was in plain view. And, depending on the night you were present, you might easily have bumped into the display's impresario himself, artist Tony Oursler, fine-tuning the project he titled "The Influence Machine," the first in a series of site-specific public art installations co-sponsored by the Public Art Fund, a New York City-based nonprofit, and Target department stores. Still, it could be said that Oursler did share some of the Wizard's working methods: After all, both apparitions were created through a combination of imagination and technology. And it is precisely that combination that is now adding a new dimension to public art as we know it. Large-scale sculptures, murals, and other more permanent displays continue to have their place in the urban environment; but many artists now are using high-tech materials—everything from sophisticated digital video equipment, to lasers, to smoke machines—to truly transform that environment, if only for a short time, into something more beautiful or otherworldly.

In Oursler's work, that sense of the supernatural was incorporated into the installation's content: Oursler did extensive research on the relationship between communication technology and spiritualism in preparation for the project. "I began to notice that there was a kind of polarity between good and evil, darkness and light that related to this technology over and over again," he says. These parallels also tied in to contrasts between the city and nature, which were reflected in his choice of a park as his venue—a "natural space" contained within a "manmade space."

Reinterpreting urban space is a primary motivation for many media-based public artists, and their methods of doing so range widely. Bruce Odland, for instance, is one of a handful of artists who take an aural rather than a visual approach to the transformation of our surroundings. Visitors and locals who have stood under the overpass near MASS MoCA (Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art) in North Adams, Massachusetts, know what the creative use of a little technology and a few simple tools can do for an inhospitable and unfrequented place. Working with partner Sam Auinger, Odland installed tubes along the highway bridge that "tune" the road noise: that is, they convert the sounds

of engines, horns, and brakes into pure tones. These humming sounds are then broadcast under the bridge through a set of minimal, cube-like speakers. This bit of aural alchemy lent the area some much-needed lyricism, and the resulting increase of visitors to the site continued the process of humanization and reclamation.

Odland and Auinger have created similar installations in other cities and industrial centers—in Rome, they reconciled the disparity between the city's cacophonous traffic noise and the ancient calm of the Forum by attaching microphones inside amphorae, which, simply by their shape, retooled the scooter engines and horns into bell-like tones. "I think of it as taking a real sore spot and making it into a feature," explains Odland. "Really raw and unfriendly, ill-thought-of public spaces can become nice hang-out spots." Lewis deSoto, a California-based artist, is taking a similar approach in formulating an upcoming sound installation for the San Francisco International Airport. The piece involves

broadcasting fragments of a larger musical composition before each public announcement, so that, heard in succession, they form a recognizable whole. According to deSoto, his challenge was to discover "what kinds of sounds one uses when one is trying to create a good feeling in a place that, for travelers, can be kind of tense."

While deSoto is using the technology at his disposal simply to instill an element of beauty into an often-hectic environment, Odland aims to recast that environment

entirely. "If you look at the culture sonically, it's a mess," he says. "Anything that makes money is allowed to make sound. We may be congratulating ourselves on living in the information age, visually, but sonically, it's the age of noise. As a public artist, I'm trying to put forth an observation of our culture by thinking with my ears—I'm interested in making something beautiful out of the noise."

Of course, despite the cultural self-congratulation that Odland mentions, most cities are as "noisy" visually as they are aurally. If things that make money are allowed to make sound, they are often licensed to make sights as well. Obvious examples can be found high above Times Square or on the busiest streets of London or Tokyo, where the jumbotrons and supertrons promote a dizzying array of names and products, all on a scale traditionally calculated to inspire worship. Directly transforming these mammoth commercials isn't something most artists could attempt even if they wished to; but some are interrupting the visual onslaught with their own contrasting images.

Last spring, for instance, bemused tourists in Times Square who happened to look up at a quarter past the hour might have seen an enormous woman's face, seemingly pressed up against the inside of the NBC Astrovision by Panasonic screen in an effort to break free. More recently, the screen was graced, also for a minute every hour, by a black-and-white house cat of gigantic proportions, squatting placidly above the traffic, lapping milk from a dish. These whimsical clips, courtesy of, respectively, Swiss video auteur Pipilotti Rist working under the aegis of the Public Art Fund, and the artistic team of Peter Fischli and David Weiss (for arts organization Creative Time) acted a little like visual hiccups



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