

Laterna Magica — Electronic Street Art

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The street lamp is a form of technology that — outside, under the stars — sheds light into the darkness of night. Light, in all its qualities, plays an essential role in human life. Here, we are primarily interested in the phenomenon of illumination. At the moment human beings learned to make fire, the era of artificial illumination began. The development of street lighting has brought with it more powerful social side effects than any other technological innovation. It has provided mankind with additional hours for outdoor activities, expanded social life in public spaces into the night, and, thus, changed human behavior.

The discovery of this new level of our physical environment — so familiar to us by day — would have been impossible without the street lamp. The social effects and behavioral changes brought about by the TV set's arrival in the living room have frequently been addressed. Analogies and parallels to the campfire of the cavemen have been drawn, but almost everyone seems to have forgotten about the psychological significance that the street lamp has for us humans.

Another factor which has provided us with the inspiration to use the street lamp as a instrument for electronic street art is its inconspicuous appearance. It is a common object of everyday life. The Laterna Magica — like every normal street lamp — lights up its surroundings at night. But we have expanded the functional mechanism of this source of illumination by one decisive dimension by building a video projector into it. When a passer-by enters the cone of light given off by the lamp, he/she is picked up by a motion detector and thereby activates the projector. Images are then projected onto the street, with the street lamp continuing to provide illumination. Passers-by now find themselves, as it were, on the inside of a video monitor screen. Upon exiting the motion detector's range, only the projection disappears and the normal street lighting remains on.

The projection itself can be anything: pictures from an exhibition, a film, text messages, and — via computer with Internet access — all images which the Internet makes available. Moreover, the Internet serves as a transmitter for live images originating from anywhere in the world. With Laterna Magica, the street lamp becomes a new web interface.

We are interested in two aspects of this process of superimposing disparate strata of reality: the free access for all to information from the Internet, and the possibility of free expression — without intervention and adaptation — in public spaces. Thus, Laterna Magica is potentially a tool for those seeking to express themselves via computer in public spaces and all who wish to find a new quality of the imagination.

Realized within the Ars Electronica Research & Residence Program.