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"PYTHAGORAS PLANNED IT. WHY DID THE PEOPLE STARE?"

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Art today seems to be becoming a much more public phenomenon, not only from the experiential viewpoint but also in terms of those who commission the art works. With the increase in governmental patronage for the arts, politicians, art administrators, and to a much lesser extent the artists themselves are being pressed to define the role of the artist in society.¹ As well as this, works which are commissioned are generally supposed to involve the public in some sort of "significant and meaningful manner". There was, of course, public involvement with art in the Renaissance, but the Renaissance world was far removed from our supermarket world of modern art. In contrast to the Renaissance, too, we tend to separate our art galleries and museums from our normal living and working space, both public and private. Art has become separated from life; it has become a narcissistic activity for the young.

Today's artists are becoming more and more geared to the museum environment, and from their early art education they conceive of their works as existing only in the museum or the gallery. This brings the artist to a dilemma which he must face: does he, at the same time as he is forced to watch his environment disintegrate, insulate himself in the private gallery world, producing art objects that as part of a consumer society multiply and become part of the pollution? Or does he dare to face the challenge of his own environment and attempt to turn his vision to the landscape of the modern city?

The city, it seems to me, is a multi-textured thing, and its changing face should have the same drama and joy for its citizens as the changing seasons. In the planning of the spaces that gradually cohere into a city, I believe too that both with regard to the part as well as the whole man's aesthetic spirit must prevail, as is so clear when we look at a Mediterranean fishing village, a medieval town, or Renaissance piazza. It is axiomatic to say that art embodies the spiritual, that it should not be created merely to please the material it is made from: it should be for man and for the body politic. Too often in our modern world of long-range planning, public architecture and transportation, the emphasis is on a mindless perpetuation of the system rather than on the human beings which these systems are supposedly designed to serve. The artist's task is to rescue modern man from the isolation and despair of this mechanistic world by sensitizing his visual awareness and by raising his aesthetic consciousness so that he can again perceive his individual worth in relation to the environmental whole.

One of my own attempts to do this was in a seven-day performance piece, "LIGHT SPACE 77," an environmental light sculpture commissioned by the City of Chicago for the Lakefront Festival in 1977. Because the piece was not concrete in the way that art usually is, it was unusual for a city to commission such a work. In



Plate 1: Hagar Qim, Malta. Photo: John David Mooney.

fact it was the first major work that they had ever commissioned from one of their own living artists. It did not last after the taxpayer's money had been spent: there was no object to see, touch, or even discern after the last performance, yet the city carried through the entire concept from start to finish. It should be said, I suppose, that Chicago is a city of Irish politicians who with their pragmatic management skills also possess a sense of poetry, and although the sculpture can no longer be seen, the emotional impact of the patterns of light is stored within the individual and collective psyche of the city and can be stirred by the visual stimuli of the environment which it once transformed.

If the artist of today wishes to speak with immediacy and effectiveness to the public, he must be sensitive to his audience, as well as to the complexities of his creative drive. I drew my inspiration for "LIGHT SPACE 77" from the standing stones and megaliths of the pre-Celtic world; yet, the audience in this case perceived this environmental light sculpture as part of their own space, just as temples were once constructed to achieve a consciousness of time, space, and order extending far beyond the people for whom the temple was built.

Richard Demarco introduced me to those spaces of the ancient world but for many years I had drawn upon the illuminated Irish manuscripts as a source for my painting and sculpture: the energy embodied in those manuscripts is also found in the architectural space of the standing stones. Conversely, the standing stones themselves occupy space which is not just architectural, nor are they merely a

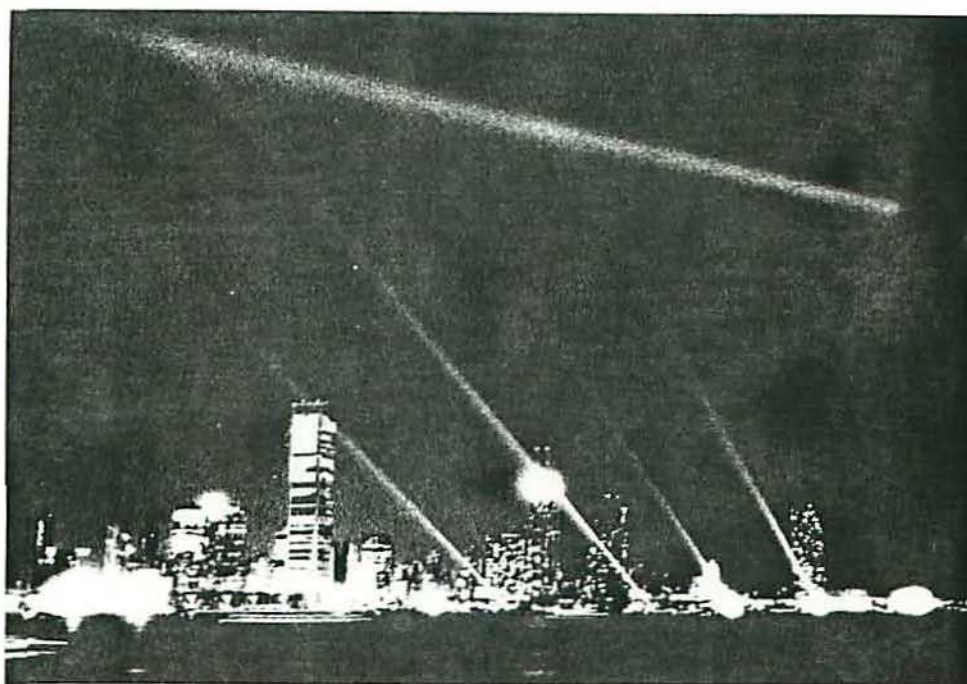


Plate 2: "Light Space 77" Environmental Light Sculpture, Chicago. Photo: Mary Cairns.

collection of objects. They are about fears, mysteries, beliefs, and levels of consciousness which cannot be recorded in a tangible way.

"LIGHT SPACE" was not a static piece, but an open and expansive kinetic light sculpture, stretching along eight miles of shoreline, out over the water and six miles into the sky. At the time this work was being executed, Robert O'Driscoll and Richard Demarco were at the alignments of Carnac. The standing lines of that space and the standing lines of the piece in Chicago were one and the same, a coexistence in time and spirit. Light is about energy; energy derives from light. Place has its own magnetism. There is something magnetic about a location where a Christian church is built on the same spot as a megalithic or pagan temple. Standing stones, those at Hagar Qim in Malta for example, owe their location perhaps to the part they played in certain solar and lunar calculations some 4200 years ago, but they still possess the same mystery and presence and the same sense of being in touch with a spirit beyond ourselves, that they must have possessed in the beginning. In the case of Chicago, it could be said that the series of "Standing Stones" that constitute the city, though built for a different reason, began with the same impulse that stirred the early temple builders. The early French traders came to a sacred space which the Indians used as a source of water and fire and built a city on exactly the same site. However, instead of a group of stones built for a purpose which is mystical and spiritual, the traders and merchants of the past 100 years have built a series of stones, one taller than the next, trying to reach up to the

materialistic, "relevant" statement about economics, which only brings us right back down to the ground again. No matter how tall the next building is built, it will never raise one up, and if it does raise the level of a certain type of consciousness, it cannot be a Celtic one.

In my light sculpture I attempted to connect that line of rocks to another line of stones in the universe through what some may call a very ephemeral "material": light. I attempted too to incorporate the same notion of water and rhythm that Daniel Burnham had in mind when he offered his plan for the City of Chicago in 1909. Burnham was in his own way as sensitive as the temple-builders to the space around the stones — in Burnham's case this was a sensitivity to the rhythm and reflection of light on water — but while the movement of people, change of light, and rhythm of the water helps his plan to work by day, at night, as the city glows with thousands of artificial lights, his park plan falls apart. Seldom do architects of today design their buildings using light as it is used in the Mediterranean folk tradition, or with the megalithic stones. Carnac generates an even greater mystery at night and St. Paul's Cathedral in Malta is illuminated at night by burning candles while the same surface by day accepts the sun as natural.

The light beams of "LIGHT SPACE 77" were my solution to a problem given to me by the City of Chicago, which was to do a piece for eight million people and in the process to extend their consciousness of the soul and of the city. Burnham's plan was his temple built to Lake Michigan, symmetrical certainly in the design, but only the design sequence to the north, adjacent to the river, was completed. I first drew small sketches using the extension of line to create light alignments in different positions eight miles to the south. From these sketches a model was built of a piece created to bring an entire city together, able to be seen from land and water, with light beams going six miles into the sky. Even the airlines announced, "Would you please look out your window, there's a sculpture in the sky, as we go by."

The piece actually began with riverboats down the Chicago River and searchlights placed on 350' long barges. The "Light Brigade," the artists and architects who comprised the community, created the sculpture, bringing together, like the temple builders, skills from many walks of life: architecture, engineering, economics, art. They rehearsed with flashlights according to directions which I had formulated in a manual, and they gathered each night to operate the searchlights. This again goes back to stones; two flints, i.e., carbon rods, being struck against each other to make light. Assisting the "Light Brigade" were the union electricians, who, accustomed as they were to operating searchlights, found themselves in a different ambience: out on barges and on land actively participating in the creation of a sculpture.

These standing lines of light moved every eight minutes, so many degrees radial and so many degrees azimuth. They did not rotate, but were a series of kinetic structures. Architects came from all over, saying that this was the perfect complement to the architecture of the city. I was concerned not only with the

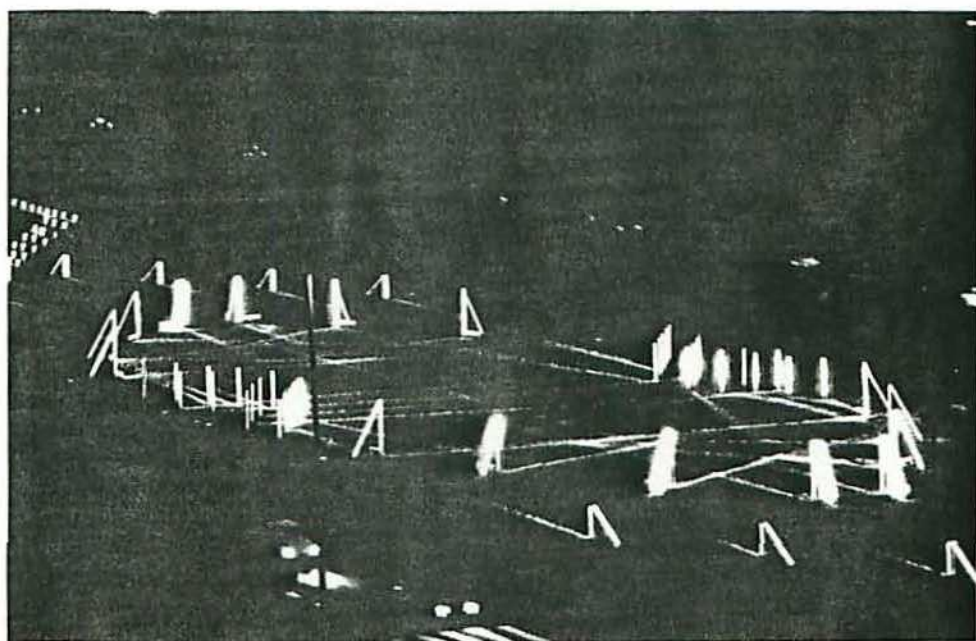


Plate 3: "Zagreb Light Lines," Environmental Light Sculpture, Yugoslavia, 1979.

fourth dimension of time and space, but, as well, with two-dimensional activities — when there was a cloud cover, I could execute drawings in the sky. Imagine making a drawing on clouds with everybody able to watch the process. This space and these lines just didn't happen to come about; they evolved from works which I had been doing earlier. "Oriental Interlude" and "Return to the East" are both steel sculptures, line drawings in space — gleaming white, as they transform the ground plane into a kinetic page of their own shadows. "Springflow," also a white steel sculpture, placed at the entrance of the grounds to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, attempts to titillate the sky in the same way that these beams do.

Every night the Chicago sculpture was different. The programs were different; the lights themselves were placed in varying locations along the lakefront on each of the seven evenings, and the space never remained the same. I handled the whole event by radio control, as well as through the manuals: I had, therefore, the opportunity to rearrange the configuration, if I so chose. Sometimes when clouds came in, I would call: "Station 104, would you please move your light from 60 degrees radial to 20 degrees radial, and from 30 degrees azimuth to 90 degrees azimuth," thus beginning a four-mile drawing in the sky. As the light lines changed position, they moved very slowly around each other, creating circles like the temple below them, and the temple above them in the air. In his poem, "The Statues," Yeats wrote: "Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?" There was even an aesthetic relationship between these lines of light and the masts of the sailboats in the harbour. Many of the familiar things of the city were invested with a new luminous presence: for a moment people perceived with an increased visual

acuteness, a heightened consciousness of what had always been there.

It is my intention to continue to work with the environment, so that when one looks to land or sky one will perceive an expansion of possibilities, a new horizon, or the old familiar horizon with a new level of consciousness. That is my role.

NOTE

¹At a recent Congressional hearing on the state of the arts in America, I was one of the two artists out of a plethora of museum directors, art administrators, etc. who were asked to provide material and testimony.

IN: THE CELTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

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