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Author/s:
McQuire, S

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Light art, projection and the aesthetics of urban appropriation

A tale of two cities

Shortly after his arrival in New York in 1915 Marcel Duchamp famously declared: “New York is itself a work of art, a complete work of art’ (Duchamp 1915: 428). In this chapter, I’ll suggest that a key element in this acclamation was New York’s pioneering experimentation with electric lighting which was transforming the city into a novel perceptual experience, a living, breathing ‘special effect’. Just short of a century later in 2013, Melbourne initiated its White Night festival, becoming one of hundreds of cities around the world that now regularly stage light art festivals. I want to use these two events to explore how our understanding of art and the city has shifted over this time. What is at stake when it begins to make sense to describe the city as ‘a work of art’ in Duchamp’s terms? What understanding of art—and of urbanism—is being invoked in such a declaration? Equally, what is at stake today when cities around the world engage in open competition to illuminate their built environment with large-scale projections and other light-based artworks? Such questions assume increasing urgency as light art events become increasingly intertwined with the new global imaginaries of urban branding strategies that now include the distributive dynamics of social media platforms. Is the contemporary city *even more*—or *rather less*—a work of art than it was in Duchamp’s day? Should the prominence of light festivals be read as a sign that art has found a new place in the contemporary city? Or is this proliferation a signal that art has been exiled from the city more radically and completely than ever before?

An urban readymade

Duchamp's interview in which he pronounced New York 'a complete work of art' was undoubtedly part-provocation. Coming to the United States from war-torn Europe, Duchamp found himself—much to his own surprise—something of a celebrity. His 1912 painting *Nude descending a staircase no. 2* had been included in the Armory show of 1913, the exhibition often credited with introducing European modernism to a broad American public.[1] Duchamp's *Nude* was the leading 'scandal' of the show, and thus the lightning rod for all kinds of controversy about modern art. Some interventions, such as the cartoon 'The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway)', published in *The New York Evening Sun*, were witty.[2] Much was not but helped establish the pattern for the now familiar sport of debating what could or should—and *should not*—constitute Art.

Courted by the press, Duchamp fanned this ready-made image of cultural provocateur. Instructively, the interview given to *Art + Decoration* was attributed to 'Marcel Duchamp, iconoclast'. Yet there was clearly a more serious side to his provocation, which belongs to the profound rethinking of art in which Duchamp was engaged at the time. Even before leaving Paris, he had been convinced that painting was obsolete. On seeing an airplane propeller at an industrial exhibition, he famously remarked: 'Painting is over and done with. Who could do anything better than this propeller?' (quoted in Kuenzli & Naumann 1989: 54).[3] This conviction would underpin the formal naming of his 'ready-mades', which occurred shortly after his arrival in North America. While it is hard to overstate the influence that this trajectory would have on 20th century art, I want to partially disengage from this more familiar narrative in order to pay serious attention to his acclamation of New York.

Instructively, it was not just particular buildings or structures that inspired Duchamp's acclaim. While he favourably compared the Woolworth Building, which had only recently opened and was then the world's tallest, to Europe's Gothic cathedrals, it is the *city itself* that he names as complete work of art. Duchamp also makes it clear that his approbation is not in keeping with the traditional *beaux arts* evaluation of cities such as Rome or Paris, replete with their widely recognized stock of beautiful buildings, ornate fountains and famous sculptures. Evoking the recently published and 'misunderstood' Futurist Manifesto, Duchamp (1915: 428) affirms the "[American] idea of demolishing old buildings, old souvenirs", arguing "we must learn to forget the past, to live our own lives in our time." Without providing much in the way of detail, here Duchamp is giving precocious voice to a sensibility that will soon swell into an article of faith—almost an orthodoxy—for the diverse iconoclasts who collectively made up the modernist *avant-gardes*. This was the belief that the city —more precisely, the new type of city being incubated in New York and Chicago— would displace 'nature' as the primary reference point for contemporary art.

With their unprecedented mix of scale and congestion, these cities were the first empirical manifestations of the ideology-in-making that Rem Koolhaas would retrospectively dub 'Manhattanism'. While it went unrecognized at the time, New York was another of Duchamp's readymades.

Switching on the readymade city

In describing the modern city as a work of art, Duchamp inscribes a new threshold in how we might understand art, as a field remade by science, technology,

and engineering as much as by the products of modern architecture and design.. Similar themes concerning the way the new built environment catalysed a revolution in perception recur in comments made by a long line of artists visiting New York in the early 20th century, including Ezra Pound, Maxim Gorky, Fritz Lang, Sergei Eisenstein and Vladimir Mayakovsky. They remark on the scale and density of the skyscrapers; the variety and velocity of the crowds; the abrupt and abbreviated cultural mannerisms from spoken slang to stand-up lunch counters; and of course, the concentration of new technologies and commodity forms which coursed through urban life, galvanising its rhythms. But arguably the single most important element that defines New York's distinctively 'modern' urbanity was its electric lighting. It is instructive that Duchamp singled out the Woolworth building. When the building was officially opened by President Woodrow Wilson on April 24, 1913, the lavish ceremony took place at night. Wilson, who was in Washington, pressed a button to remotely switch on 80,000 lights that flooded both the building's interior and exterior with radiance.[4] The white external cladding of the building was one of the first designed with its illumination in mind. This profusion of electric light, in concert with the new prominence of transparent and highly reflective surfaces, introduced a new dimension into urban design. It also created the modern city as an historically unique perceptual environment.

By the time Duchamp came to New York, more than twenty blocks of Broadway were covered in electrical signage, and their radiant intensity had already projected its 'Great White Way' nickname around the world. Soon countless cities in the United States and elsewhere would seek to imitate Broadway's lights as a way of cementing their own claim to being 'modern'. Elsewhere I have argued that urban lighting formed one of the foundations of the 'media city' in which the interplay between

'new media' and architecture systematically reworked modern urban experience and the social relations of space and time (McQuire 2008). In this vein, the electrification of city lighting must be recognized as not only destabilizing many traditional precepts and protocols for organizing urban space, but, in the same action, introducing new affordances with quite different potentials and dynamics. There are two specific aspects that I want to pay attention to here. First, intense illumination generated a highly visceral experience, but what gave it an extra charge was that it also constituted a potent symbol capable of evoking the wider set of changes that were rapidly reworking social life. Second, and the significance of this will be made more apparent below, new modes of collective reception were integral to the experience of urban lighting. Both aspects are neatly captured by historian David Nye (1997: 88), who, borrowing from Leo Marx, has described urban lighting as generating an 'unintentional sublime'.

> For the millions of tourists who came to stare at them in Times Square, the signs only incidentally advertised an array of products. They came to see the sheer size and magnificence of the flashing signs; they were engulfed in a restless crowd, and the roar of the city. This electric landscape, even more than the new electrified factories, was the cultural ground from which modernism sprang.

When Duchamp called New York a complete work of art, he was doing more than simply making the claim that the city resembled the new aesthetic 'styles' that were emerging in painting and sculpture in the early 20th century. Calling the city a work of art registered the systematic and yet, in many ways, unplanned and unanticipated confluence of developments that had turned the city into an immersive experiment on the human sensorium. In offering New York as an exemplary inheritor

of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* (literally 'total artwork'), Duchamp was one of the first to flag that aesthetic focus was beginning to drift away from individual and discrete objects towards what McLuhan would later characterize as *environment*.

For McLuhan (1967), any 'dominant' technology or medium constitutes a 'total space' for thinking and acting. A key effect of any such 'totality' was precisely that its environmental effects largely receded from view, as the environment became the taken-for-granted space of thought and social life (McLuhan 1967: 164). From this perspective, McLuhan (1970: 14) later argued that 'new media' "are not bridges between man and nature: they are nature". It is the specific and privileged role of 'art' to register the invisible forms of this new nature and render them visible: 'every new technology creates an environment that translates the old or preceding technology into an art form" (McLuhan 1967: 163).

There are a couple of things worth noting here. First, McLuhan's use of 'environment' did not map easily onto existing expressions such as 'urban environment'.[5] Second, McLuhan's understanding of art was arguably closer to Freud than Duchamp. McLuhan regards artists as social antennae—or 'probes' — who are able to pick up on 'environmental effects' in advance of others. This is not because artists are 'intutitively' ahead of the pack, but because they operated according to an 'integral' sensibility that allowed them to perceive the limits of particular environments. In contrast, McLuhan believed that specialists such as scientists tended to become blinkered and blind-sided by their environments because, in order to be functional, they *had* to operate within the dominant terms of an existing environment. Moreover, while McLuhan argued that art's capacity to reveal the invisible environment was generally belated,— a matter of drawing out hidden lines from the

past — he hypothesized in the 1960s that "we may be catching up with ourselves." Extolling the example of Pop Art "in taking the outer environment and putting it in the art gallery," McLuhan argued that this marked a new phase of human existence in which "we have begun to process the environment itself as an art form" (McLuhan 1967: 164). The consequences of "beginning to deal with our actually existing envionment as an artform" would be *planetary*: "We will caress and pattern every facet, every contour of this planet as if it was a work of art, just as surely as we have put a new environment around it" (McLuhan 1967: 164).

McLuhan's rather programmatic and overly unitary conception of 'environment' has its problems. But his challenge to comprehend the *urban as environment* adds a critical edge to Duchamp's initial insight concerning the modern city as work of art. Our challenge in the present is to address the city as a sensory and perceptual milieu that is comprised not only by the interplay of architecture and electric light, as it was for Duchamp but is increasingly digitized and computerized.

Electropolis unlimited

A century after its initial acclamation, the old *electropolis*—as cities such as New York, Chicago and Berlin came to be known in the 1920s (Neumann 2002)— is barely recognisable. Which is to say the electropolis is now everywhere. This spread has generated complex effects rippling across social, cultural, political and environmental domains among others. Long gone are the crowds who once marvelled at the sheer novelty of electric lighting. When Edison ran his initial public demonstrations of street lighting at Menlo Park in New Jersey on NewYear's eve in

1879, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company ran special trains to cater for public enthusiasm to witness the event in person. Today, it is the absence of electric lighting in an urban setting that is more likely to be noticeable than its presence. This situation has created new interference patterns extending to our relation to the cosmos: blinded by the earthly light of our cities, we no longer see the stars. And yet, some tendencies established in the old electropolis continue, albeit in new forms and with changed significance. Most strikingly, the last decade has seen a global proliferation of urban illumination festivals (Jackson 2015). I want to briefly uncover some of the major currents supporting this development, before I move on to consider a specific case of Melbourne's *White Night*.

The growth of urban lighting festivals around the world has occurred at the confluence of several trajectories including developments relating to technological change, new practices in contemporary art, and growing interest in the cultural 'activation' of urban public spaces. Like other contemporary media, the field of urban lighting has experienced profound and rapid technological change over the last twenty years. A major innovation has been the introduction of LED lighting which is not only more energy efficient, economic and reliable to run, but offers much greater flexibility in terms of color and form. Earlier lighting formats such as incandescent bulbs and neon tubes had their color palette 'hardwired' into them. Energy use, heat exchange and cost all combined to constrain lighting design options. In contrast LED lights are far more malleable and offer new opportunities for configuration around existing urban structures or arrangement into new patterns. LED has also become a key video support and is widely used in contemporary urban screens and media facades, as well as some outdoor projection systems. At the same time, the field of lighting has been transformed by its integration with sophisticated forms of

computational control. As architect and long-term member of the MIT Media Lab, Bill Mitchell, remarked: 'the traditional distinctions between architectural lighting design and computer graphics are beginning to disappear. Anything that lights up can be treated as an addressable, programmable pixel' (2005: 88–9). In these conditions, opportunities for creative use of urban lighting have been vastly amplified. In place of what might be called the simple dramatic event created by instantly flooding the Woolworth building with light, there is now an expanded urban canvas capable of enacting far more complex dramas. Lighting can be choreographed in multiscalar sequences and intricately syncopated rhythms, can be made responsive to diverse real-time inputs such as local weather conditions, and form-fitted onto buildings and sculptures through projection mapping techniques that enable the precise alignment of images in relation to the surfaces, forms and volumes of physical structures.

The growth of creative light art and urban projection also owes something to the new condition that art began to enter around the 1960s. Drawing inspiration from a variety of sources including Duchamp's ready-mades, Dadaist provocation and Surrealist walks, art practice came to be centered less around the production of durable material objects and more around the staging of ephemeral events.[6] . What Lucy Lippard (1973) aptly described as the 'dematerialization of the art object' was evident in the growth of practices that foregrounded process, that did not necessarily result in a 'finished' (or even *finishable*) object, and were not necessarily undertaken by recognized professional artists. The emergence of video art in the 1960s gave a specific technocultural form to these more open, participatory and interactive currents in which 'feedback' between art work, audience and environment took a greater role. By the end of the century, interactive media art, recalibrated by digitization and computerization, had become an established element of the gallery and biennale

circuit. Large-scale media installations increasingly spilled outside the gallery onto the street. I'll come back to the implications of this last tendency below.

Contemporary support for creating public space art overlaps with growing urban policy interest in 'activating' urban space, and this confluence signals a significant shift in policy settings for thinking about the relation between art and the city. Urban activation strategies emerged as part of a broader recognition that key precepts of modern urban planning had failed. By the 1970s, the functional zoning of cities prioritised by the influential Athens Charter created by the Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) in (1933)[7], including the systematic attempt to separate the circulatory and social functions of the street, had reached a dead-end. Shifts in the form of capitalism and the structure of the global economy resulted in large swathes of former industrial areas sinking into dereliction while the city centre—largely abandoned as living space—was often left almost completely unused outside office hours. The clarion call to change diredction first sounded in the 1960s by Jacobs (1961) and later, Lefebvre (1996), led to growing interest in philosophies of 'mixed use' and 'people-centred' urban design. By the 1990s, partly driven by a particular vision of how digital technology would 'reshape' the economy,[8] cultural policy was being reoriented to greater recognition of the role of 'creative industries', while urban policy was being reshaped by the need to attract and better harness the skills of the creative community.

I'm deliberately painting this picture of shifts in economics, cultural policy and urban policy in broad strokes. This is not because I think any of these trajectories are homogeneous in either composition or outcome. Lefebvre's 'right to the city' is a long way from Richard Florida's 'creative class' and contemporary interest in promoting 'urban activation' is more likely to stem from city-branding initiatives than

any deeper commitment to participatory urban democracy. What I'm trying to register, first, is the broad setting in which urban lighting festivals were able to emerge as an early 21st century global *zeitgeist.* Second, and more significant to my argument below, if we accept that urban lighting festivals are generated by the confluence of developments in art practice, technological innovation and urban policy, it is unsurprising that these festivals embody numerous tensions, especially relating to how we understand art and the city.

Crowded Night

White Night was first staged in Melbourne in 2013 and has been repeated annually since.[9] It was inspired by the success of Paris' *Nuit Blanche*, an event first staged in 2002, in which the city's cultural institutions were opened at night free of charge to the public. But while *White Night* Melbourne (hereafter WNM) has regularly involved commissions from the city's major cultural institutions, it differed from the original *Nuit Blanche* insomuch as it was conceived as a predominantly street-based festival. For the first WNM, the city's major cultural institutions including the National Gallery of Victoria, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the State Library of Victoria were all open to the public and the event included numerous exhibitions and performances hosted by them. But the distinctive aspect of WNM was intended to be the transformation of the city itself, symbolized by a profusion of large-scale projections onto landmark Melbourne buildings such as Flinders Street station. This ambition was evident in the language used by WNM's inaugural creative director Andrew Walsh, who forecast that WNM would "suspend the everyday as the city's streetscape was transformed into a wonderland of sights and sounds," adding the "White Night Melbourne experience aims to challenge people's

perceptions and get people to notice what they see and know in a totally new light" (quoted in Weekend Notes 2013). Then Victorian Premier and Minister for the Arts Ted Baillieu spoke from much the same script, stating that Melbourne will "become a canvas and a playground, with many streets turned into pedestrian thoroughfares, projections lighting up the city, and plenty for all ages to explore, enjoy and participate in" (quoted in Weekend Notes 2013).

These ambitions struck a chord. The first WNM caused a shock when an estimated 300, 000 people turned up. The next year that number grew to 550,000, in a city with a population of just over 4 million at the time. This set in motion a series of public discourses that have continued to play out ever since. One concerned the 'content' of WNM and whether or not it should be considered 'art'. The other was about urban crowds and crowding. Instructively, Debbie Cuthbertson's review of WMN 2015, written for Melbourne's premier broadsheet newspaper *The Age,* began: 'In one respect—crowd management —White Night Melbourne 2015 appears to have been fairly successful". She went on to add: "But the spectacle was just that —there was far less to challenge the mind, and very little with ideas of genuine substance to communicate." (Cuthbertson 2015) I'm not really interested in debating the *substance* of her judgment, which turns on the old trope opposing artistic 'substance' to mere surface 'spectacle', beyond noting that it was representative of a more general consensus that had developed among art critics and many in the professional art community. While less evident in responses to the first iteration of WNM, by the third year many had concluded that, if WNM had to be acknowledged as art, it was not particularly *good* art. The extent to which such judgments were colored by waning novelty, as urban projection events became more commonplace, or by the fact that works by recognized artists appeared alongside creations by companies such as

Sydney-based Electric Canvas who made their name creating large-scale projections for equally large-scale public events such as the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games (2000), or merely by a general suspicion of the artistic claims of *any* event that achieved such a high level of public popularity, is impossible to say. While such speculations offer grist for endless debate, they are beside the point here. What is pertinent is the way that WNM's artistic credentials tend to be tied to witnessing— or better, *experiencing* —a particular set of artistic creations. Insofar as WNM is considered art, the consensus is that its artistry consists of the display of discrete works such as projections which can be individually analysed by considering elements such as their creator's intent and their formal execution.

I've chosen intent and execution because it is the gap between them that made up what Duchamp (in a 1957 lecture given in Houston) famously called the 'art co-efficient'. Duchamp's art co-efficient presented the 'raw' work of art as "an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed" (Duchamp 1973, 139). But Duchamp's punchline was that that "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone": the artwork remained incomplete without the consummation of the spectator's experience or the critic's judgment (Duchamp 1973: 140). In retrospect, Duchamp's lecture can be seen as an early formulation of the 'active audience' thesis that is far more familiar today, advanced through better-known academic routes such as reader reception theory and cultural studies. Despite this heritage, the role of the audience in completing the work of art has been conspicuously absent in most discussions of the artistic quality of WNM. Or rather, the audience are clearly *there*, but they are figured in a particular light. As I'll argue below, this acts to significantly shape and constrain the way we can understand the relation between art and the city.

The discourse about the crowd is equally revealing as to how the *art* of WNM was mostly understood. Large crowds meant that people couldn't move through the city easily and this became a source of complaint and concern. In her review of the inaugural WNM in 2013, Cuthbertson (2013) commented: "If anything, the event was a victim of its own success. The crush of pedestrians who filled the streets, as a large swathe of the city grid was closed to cars and trams, made it difficult to move from one venue to the next." The same article reported that Premier Ted Baillieu had joked that his government would fine everyone who had been unable to reach all the events listed in the program, relieving the state debt burden in this way. By its third iteration, WNM organizers were explicitly attempting to manage congestion by spreading the attractions across a wider urban area so as to avoid 'choke' points. When attendance reaching 700,000 in 2018, the event was changed substantially for its 2019 iteration, the reorientation signalled by the title: *White Night Reimagined*. In addition to moving from summer to winter in order to fill what Creative Industries Minister Martin Foley described as a 'hole in the tourism visitation calendar' (quoted in Francis 2019), the event no longer ran through a single night from sunset to dawn but was spread over three evenings in order to better distribute the audience. Most significantly, it was no longer planned as a predominantly *street* festival but become one that was situated largely in three of the city's existing central parks: Carlton Gardens, Treasury Gardens, and Birrarung Marr. This meant that there was much less art— in terms of projections, performances, pop-ups and the like—in the city streets, and therefore less need of street closures. Unlike previous years, cars and trams continued to run through the city during the event: there were some restrictions but no general pedestrian takeover.

The revamping of WNM was deemed a success on a number of fronts. Despite

the wet and wintry conditions, it still attracted just over 700,000 visitors spread across the three nights (Arts Review 2019). From an organisational point of view, set up and take-down was undoubtedly more straight forward. And extending the duration beyond a single night was in keeping with earlier decisions that had been taken with an eye to maximising return on the government-funded investment, such as creating satellite White Night events by relocating the same art works to regional cities. Above all, the redesign was motivated by the idea of overcoming congestion to enable a better flow of people so they would all *get to see the art*. But what does 'seeing the art' mean in this context? Were the organizers looking in the right place? To what extent was the 'reimagining' of WNM motivated by a deeper if unspoken agenda?

The art of the crowd

As I noted earlier, artists and critics have been rethinking the nature of art practice for a long time now. Non-object based practices, time-based formats such as video, and various currents of participatory art have shifted attention away from the monopoly of discretely bounded, stable and relatively permanent works towards forms of art that involve more porous and evolving processes in which interplay with audiences have become increasingly important. This has taken a particular shape as computerization and digital networks offer new technical capacities to create works that respond to various kinds of audience input. In the process, 'participation' has gravitated from what Duchamp characterized in 1957 as an element of a composite 'creative act' involving "deciphering and interpreting" to a more embodied and performative condition. Half a century after Duchamp, media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (2009) honed this point about audience collaboration being fundamental to

enabling the creative act:

> That's a collaboration that has often been identified (for example in Duchamp's maxim *le regard fait le tableau*) but now it is inherent to any interactive proposal. In the end, *Body Movies* or *Vectorial Elevation* are platforms that are taken over by the public […]. If no one participates the pieces simply do not exist.[10]

Arguably, the most developed statement of this new participatory condition is Nicholas Bourriaud's (2002) concept of relational aesthetics. Bourriaud, was largely (although not entirely) concerned with art that was staged in the context of recognized gallery and exhibition settings. But, as I've argued at length elsewhere (McQuire 2008: 100-105), the shift that he articulates in relation to art practice offers a productive model for thinking about the changing nexus of art and the public space of the city. Bourriaud's proposition arose out of his desire to distinguish earlier modernist practices from more contemporary participatory art projects. He argued that this distinction can be made on the basis that contemporary art has begun to focus more directly on the *process of social encounter itself*: "The possibility of a *relational* art (an art taking as a theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social content, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art (Bourriaud 2002: 14)." For Bourriaud, the intersubjectivity of social relations forms the 'raw material' for relational art: intersubjectivity is "to today's art what mass production was to Pop Art and Minimal Art" (Bourriaud 2002: 42). Relational art is not a matter of 'representing' social encounters, but of staging such encounters.

It's at this point that I can begin to draw some of my threads together more explicitly in the form of a proposition. What if the 'art' of WNM is not to be found only in the series of installations, projections, performances and other attractions that are mounted each year, but belongs instead—at least in part—to the experience of the crowds that throng the city to see it? More precisely, what if the *work* of art is precisely its facilitation of this intersubjective experience in which a large crowd takes over the city? This means taking it back from the cars and utilitarian and corporate functions that usually dominate the space, and instead freely occupying the streets, encountering the social space of the city and each other in new ways in the process? What if congestion and crowding were not getting in the way of 'seeing the art' but crucial to experiencing new ways of 'being with'?

Let me sharpen these questions further. Let's recall for a moment Elias Canetti's suggestion that the experience of the crowd is the origin of a distinctively modern, secular experience of equality. For Cannetti, the modern crowd generates a unique energy— what he calls *discharge*—which overcomes the habitual distances, both social and spatial, that separate individuals from one other.

> Only together can men free themselves from their burdens of distance and this, precisely, is what happens in a crowd. During the discharge distinctions are thrown off and all feel *equal*. In the density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near to the other as he is to himself; and an immense feeling of relief ensues. (Cannetti 1984: 19)

Pointing well beyond the constraints of the gender-specific language in which he couches it, Cannetti argues that it is the desire to experience this feeling of equality that is the fundamental motivation for people becoming a crowd. He expands his

claim by suggesting that it is this experience which underpins the fundamental modern transformation of power, in which authority is no longer bestowed from above —gods, priest or monarch—but arises from ‘the people’:

> All demands for justice and all theories of equality ultimately derive their energy from the actual experience of equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd (Cannetti 1984, 32)

Cannetti’s claim is undoubtedly too sweeping. The origins of popular sovereignty are as complex as their realization is uneven. But the value of citing his thought-provoking argument here is to instigate further reflection on what is at stake—affectively and politically—in the experience of mass gathering that has been such an integral and emblematic part of the modern city. One strand of this reflection is provided in Lefebvre’s insistence that the ‘right to the city’ is not to be measured only in formal terms relating to law, government and property, but also by the capacity for situated inhabitants to act collectively so as to ‘appropriate’ the time and space of their urban surrounds. A second strand is provided by Richard Sennett’s (2012) insistence that urban civility — defined as the capacity to interact with strangers in ways that enrich the understanding and experience of all involved— is not so much a moral quality but a skill. Sennett argues that our capacity for civility will not be determined by our eagerness to ‘do the right thing’ but is something we learn through experience. It requires *practice*. The primary site for this practical learning is urban public space, insofar as it remains the key contact zone in which relatively spontaneous encounters between different social actors occur.

To argue this is not a matter of idealizing public space, which everywhere remains striated by hierarchies of power and uneven belonging, and is increasingly

being subjected to intensive digital surveillance undertaken in the names of both security and commerce. Moreover, the *demos* of almost every city is today demonstrably more diverse than in the past, while urban inhabitation is subject to new scales and rhythms of de-territorialization and re-territorialisation. All these factors make the claim for any particular instantiation of 'urban democracy' a complex and fraught undertaking. Yet, such instances continue to emerge across many fronts and in many forms, from local 'guerilla urbanism' to formal changes enacted to promote participation in urban planning processes to global movements advocating for more sustainable cities. These developments should remind us that an even bigger danger than idealism is assuming we can do nothing to change things for the better.

Where does this leave my reflection on art and the city? I certainly don't want to dismiss other ways of reading and relating to urban projections and the other artistic practices that have contributed to events such as WNM. I can still recall the astonishment I felt the first time I witnessed a sophisticated projection mapping work in Seoul in 2009, as the building surrounding the public square in which we were gathered was deconstructed by the precise application of patterned light, its surfaces seeming to gape inward and extrude outward in rhythmic pulses. Over its history WNM has certainly had its share of similarly arresting works, alongside others that have seemed far more mundane. I am also acutely aware that urban projection can support a vast spectrum of ambitions, from directly political interventions such as Krzysztof Wodiczko's projection of a swastika onto the South African embassy in Trafalgar Square London in 1985 at the height of the anti-apartheid movement to more ambient and decorative practices, extending from 'art' to those seeking a new spectacular form of marketing.

My intention here has not been to produce a comprehensive account of contemporary light art, but to draw attention to what is a still largely unrecognized and curiously un-theorised part of the 'invisible environment' of contemporary digital urbanism; namely the ambient experience of crowds bathing collectively in their custom-lit cities. This aspect comes into focus only if we reorient our perspective, loosening our customary tight focus on the 'artworks' so we can better see that the *work* of art in urban environments necessarily includes the social experience of the 'audience,' who are themselves no longer viewers but actors and interactors.

From their first appearance in the city, electric lights have incited crowds to gather. ~~And~~ When Duchamp declared New York a complete work of art in 1915, Broadway was in its infancy. Thronging beneath its bright lights were dense masses of people, urban crowds manifesting a new type of the collective energy that was both seductive and dangerous. While a festival gathering such as WNM is obviously a different type of crowd, and neither can be equated with the explicit claims made by a public protest, there is a political kernel that joins both as urban ritual. In the case of WNM, this took a particular form: collective occupation of the central business district, if only for a night. Despite the changing ambitions that have emerged in many cities to foster 'people-centred' urbanism, this remains a relatively rare experience. Many cities struggle to provide opportunities for *practicing* urban civility. Public art events such as WNM offer a productive avenue for doing this because they are able to catalyse social encounters with diverse others in the symbolic and physical heart of the city.

The importance of *place* to the nature of this experience can be grasped by considering Wodiczko's rationale for his own public projection practice, which he sees as a means of unmasking and exposing the power relations implicit in

architecture and buildings. Wodiczko stressed this unmasking "must happen at the very place of myth, on the site of its production, on its body—the building." Public projection is distinguished precisely its capacity to make such relations visible "so that the people on the street can observe and celebrate its final formal capitulation." While WNM was less focused on demythologizing the history of particular buildings, considered as a whole it opened the central business district of Melbourne to a new collective experience. When our research group initiated research into WMN's second iteration in 2014, we gathered rich accounts of their experience from many who attended. While many comments were about seeing particular images, performances and installations, others referred to how it *felt* to collectively take over the city (Butt, McQuire and Papastergiadis 2014). It is this collective *discharge* — which shares much with urban activism such as Reclaim the Streets, Open Streets and Critical Mass, and yet differs from all of these movements—that has been diminished in the event's redesign. To regain what has been lost, there is an urgent need to reconsider the role of the emplaced crowd in the art of the contemporary city.

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[1] The exhibition was displayed from February 17 until March 15 1913 at the 69th Regiment Armory in Manhattan, which gave the show its common name. It subsequently toured to Boston and Chicago.

[2] F. Griswold, "The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway)," *New York Evening Sun*, March 20, 1913.

[3] The observation was made in the company of Fernand Léger and Constantin Brancusi when visiting the *Salon de la Locomotion aérienne* in 1912, and concluded with the challenge: 'Look, could you do that?'

[4] President Wilson in fact activated a bell that conveyed a signal to on-site engineers who actually turned on the lights. Nevertheless, the event confirms Walter Benjamin's (2003:38) identification of a key technological innovation— "countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like"—which shared a common characteristic insofar as "a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps".

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[5] According to Sénécal (2007), urban environment first appears as a concept towards the end of the 19th century in the context of larger scale urban redevelopment initiatives, and debates over urban and land-use planning.

[6] This shift is evident in numerous groups and places, including Cobra, the Lettrist International, and the Situationists in Europe, Neo-Concretists such as Lygia Clarke and Helio Oiticica in Brazil, as well as the better documented and better know emergence of 'happenings' and performance art around Allan Kaprow, John Cage, and the Fluxus group in the United States.

[7] The Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was formed in 1928 by twenty-four leading modern architects including Le Corbusier.

[8] A signal threshold was the UK Blair government's release of their *Creative Industries Mapping Document* in 1998. This placed art in a broader Creative Industries field defined to include 'advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio'. The common thread linking these diverse sectors was posited as 'their origin in individual creativity' and their 'potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property'.

[9] At the time of writing, the planned integration of White Night Melbourne with the longstanding Melbourne International Arts Festival in 2020 has been put on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[10] *Body Movies* and *Vectorial Elevation* were large-scale interactive public art works created by Lozano-Hemmer and his team, involving robotic searchlights, large-scale projection and different modes for audience input and control over the works. *Vectorial Elevation* was first staged in Constitution Plaza in Mexico City (1999-2000), while *Body Movies* premiered at the Schouwburg Square in Rotterdam in 2001. Each has since been reprised multiple times in cities around the world.