

HEAD OF THE BED (*Kopfende*): Light Art and Photography  
Rainer Kehres and Sebastian Hungerer  
Gallery Clemens Thimme, July 19, 2008

.....

The artist duo Rainer Kehres & Sebastian Hungerer gained wide recognition with the *Space Invaders* installation, a luminous curtain of 192 lamps, that was introduced at the 2006 exhibit "Lichtkunst aus Kunstlicht" (light art from artificial light) in the atriums of the ZKM Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany. Quickly becoming an audience favorite, *Space Invaders* accomplished an unprecedented design and structuring of the huge former industrial space of the ZKM. At the same time, the installation also created a space for personal association, which allowed visitors of all backgrounds and ages to invent or recall their own stories. Everyone's own memories glistened in unison with the lights of the "curtain." The lights also shed their shimmer far into the city, appearing like stained-glass church windows of the former industrial cathedral. Within the building, they turned the vast foyer of the ZKM into a living room that, as a universal fireplace, also produced social warmth—an innovative variation of social sculpture.

Following *Space Invaders*, the duo's first gallery exhibit, entitled *Head of the Bed*, presented a new challenge: reducing the format of the original large-scale installation. The concept of thinking big that had governed *Space Invaders* was translated here into small nightstand lamps, which, sitting near the head of the bed, accompany people from everyday reality into the virtual world of dreams. **This is where the German exhibition title *Kopfende* originates: it means "the head of the bed," and, literally translated, also refers to "the end of the head," suggesting the transition from conscious waking state to the unconscious world of dreams.** In this smaller *Head of the Bed* exhibit, too, the ordinary and the curious are combined in roster-like shelves which fill the windows of the gallery, turning them into both show cases and light cases. Lights originating from the most private of living spaces become the membrane to public space. And just like in dreams, projections are flickering on the "pixel membrane."

Almost inevitably, the further development of *Space Invaders* was geared into two directions. On one hand, the installation was extended to include interactive involvement, in which visitors could direct the lights by their own movement in the foyer. On the other hand, viewers of an imminent large-scale installation were asked to contribute their own lamps and stories to the work of art. Thus, they are empowered to transcend mere participation by directly producing art themselves.

Based on the success of *Space Invaders*, the two light artists were invited by the Pulitzer Museum for the Arts in St. Louis, Missouri, to conceptualize a large-scale outdoors design to accompany a light art exhibit focusing on Dan Flavin's work. This move is a dual achievement: from Karlsruhe, Germany, to the United States, from museum space to public space.

In St. Louis, in close proximity to the elegant museum designed by Tadao Ando, they will execute a monumental installation at a church that was destroyed by fire a few years ago. Now, the completely burnt-out and roofless building is being revived as art space. With their installation of artificial lights, Rainer Kehres and Sebastian Hungerer conquer the church for art, giving it space and a gleaming, diaphanous roof that spans over the ruins like a starry night sky. Citizens of St. Louis were asked to donate lamps for the project, so that the entire city may participate in the building of this star bridge.

I am absolutely certain that their work in St. Louis will cause the same sensation it did in Karlsruhe. The general enthusiasm the works incited as well as their easy and joyful approachability, however, have been captured too lightly here. Much too easily, because they are composed of individual designer and kitsch lamps, the light installations themselves could be judged as just that: design and kitsch. However, such a view ignores the artistic multidimensionality of Kehres and Hungerer's work.

Let me explain a little in the following. 19<sup>th</sup>-century art was dominated by the dream of color. One of the greatest painters, Vincent van Gogh, offered this prognosis at the time: "The painter of the future will be a painter of color." And he was right (even though he primarily meant to talk about himself). The artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was indeed an artist of color. One could note that the development of painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was driven by color, by the emancipation of color. At first, this liberation took place through the change of local color (the color of the object) to absolute color. Color was increasingly liberated from its object and became abstract color, absolute color. This development led to paintings that did not feature anything else besides one single color, that is, to monochrome painting, such as the work of Yves Klein with the IKB (International Klein Blue). Thus, color itself was the motor of development in painting toward 20<sup>th</sup>-century abstraction.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the color artist increasingly becomes a light artist. He thus follows a dream of painting to artistically represent light and to incorporate this most immaterial of all artistic media into art (water color = light transparency, oil painting = luminosity of color; light and shadow). Entire schools and movements emerged from different treatment of light in painting. However, light itself, the source of all color, could never be truly captured in images.

Today, though, we are able to utilize real artificial light, not just as a representation of natural sun light, but as real artificial light. The introduction of artificial light to both humankind and art was a hymnal celebration of a "victory over the sun" (opera by Matyushin, Malevich, and two other artists, 1913). Hence, one can join Moholy-Nagy, the famous Bauhaus artist, in proclaiming that "the 20<sup>th</sup> century belongs to the light."

We can predict that just like color was a defining factor in the development of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century art, light is a defining factor in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries. And we are seeing works in which light and color, that is, light art and paint art, interact. The image develops into an image space, and this image space, a three-dimensional creation, becomes a sculpture.

This is the astonishing and touching aspect of Kehres and Hungerer's artistic light works that we must grasp. Their responsibility is not only toward the abstract sources of modern art, that is, light and color, but also toward the concrete sources. Remember 1915: Malevich painted his first abstract paintings and Duchamp exhibited his first ready-made objects. For a long time, these two directions went separate ways. Painting became a differentiated system of abstract color fields, and sculpture became more and more the realm of concrete everyday objects.

At about the same time and with the help of electric light sources, the motion picture was transmitted into the world as light art. Kehres and Hungerer combined these tendencies: in the medium of light, everyday objects and abstraction are finding together.

Common lamp shades, ready-mades of the object world, form themselves into abstract color images, into luminous color mosaics, which, to top it all, are in motion. Lamps are lanterns, color is light. Kehres and Hungerer have consequently made unique images of light from lamps—and light images. They turn objects into abstract kinetic light creations, light games, op art.

Not by means of painting, but by means of sculpture (also in the architecture), color space and color image are forming, which nevertheless do not neglect the element of time. From controlled light processes—sometimes slower, sometimes quicker, sometimes static, sometimes dynamic—we somewhat see a kinetic work of light art, a kinetic light sculpture, and perhaps we also see a painting.

This paradoxical light sculpture, this light sculpture as screen, as image, as abstraction, as ambience, constructed from everyday objects, this palette of lamps the light of which are colors, this light sculpture has indeed many aspects.

The word “lampshade” gives clues to the possible function of light as color because shade also points to screen or canvas. Canvas is not only surface that carries color, but it can also be a screen onto which light is projected. No work makes this connection more obvious than *Head of the Bed* and the ball screen *Panthella*. The pixel walls of lamps are not only luminous in themselves, but they are also being projected on. The lampshades are also image screens. This interlude of everyday luminous objects and their concurrent function as image carrier is a perfect if not welcome paradisiacal solution, which finally reconciles the two most important art movements of abstraction and objectivism. Additionally, the technical light media of photography and film or video are brilliantly combined in the process.

In the ball screen *Panthella*, a screen was constructed from half-round lampshades, onto which photos, that is, light images, of lamps from *Space Invaders* are projected. This light source is also externalized in order to cast light images onto the lamp screen. This is a wonderful picture puzzle which separates the commodities, namely the lamps, into their individual elements to cleverly recombine them. These works have virtually transformed out of themselves. In the process, the projection reaches an unusual depth with 3D effect.

## Photographs

The two artists are also astute observers of their own work. It was not the viewers of their installations alone who took countless photos and videos of the lamp curtain and thus catapulted the light artists to the top of Flickr and YouTube hit lists. The artists themselves have also photographed and artistically reflected on the many different views of the installation. The selective view of the camera revealed surprising details on the light image which had not been obvious in the overwhelming vastness of the ZKM light installation. Hence, the huge dimension of the overall work is being transformed into a size suitable for intimate living space, thus returning to the original location of its objects.

Christiane Riedel  
ZKM | Center for Art and Media  
Karlsruhe, Germany