

**Working with Light, Wind and Water:
Making the Ephemeral Durable**
Janet Echelman and Leni Schwendinger

Presenting Two Projects Each:

Janet Echelman: Portugal Waterfront Project (Porto, Portugal);
September 11th Memorial Island (Hudson River, between Hoboken, NJ and New York, NY).

Leni Schwendinger: *Dreaming in Color* (Seattle), Kingston Bridge (Glasgow, Scotland)

TIME AND CHANGE

Buddhist philosophy speaks of the one thing that is unchanging: change itself. Contrary to the built landscape typically associated with the concept of “City”, the most exciting cities are vital because of change: circulation and the ebb and flow of citizens’ day and night activities. This human element is the heart and nervous system of the urban life form. Harnessing the ephemeral, Echelman and Schwendinger provide tangible contrast to the hardscape. The art of Janet Echelman responds to the constant changes within nature and culture by using natural phenomena as the animating force of the artwork. The result is not a static object, but rather a living art form. Leni Schwendinger’s light-reflective, -transmissive and -emitting environments utilize an important quality of electrical light: the ability to dissolve through variable voltage. Simply put, the environments are “composed” by electronic means: computer programming creates sequences.

AMPLIFYING NATURAL FORCES/CREATING NEW ICONOGRAPHY

The artist’s intervention is a fixed set of possibilities inserted into an environment of variable and unpredictable movements, like winds and tides. This is a visual manifestation of the mathematical concept of amplification. If one recalls the most basic algebra, $2x=y$ the inserted elements are ‘2’ which amplifies the wind force ‘x’, to create the final result ‘y’. In a wind-sculpture utilizing net, the potential for amplifying wind becomes fixed by the length and shape of the net. The outcome is a synthesis of opposing elements, because it joins controlled elements with forces that are beyond our control. In this way, pre-existing elements (wind currents or tidal patterns) are transformed into new human-made phenomena (‘wind choreography’ of the sculpture). The interventions successfully achieve artistic goals for works of public art: to heighten our awareness of the larger, longer natural cycles that surround us, which have become practically invisible in the course of modern life.

In both Echelman and Schwendinger’s work, the audience is introduced to a startling large-scale juxtaposition to the normal built environment. Schwendinger’s installations posit a temporal-spatial relationship to site phenomena. Through composed light, space and time relationships between building, site and local activity is revealed and interpreted. This work exposes inner workings: marking, announcing and signaling, for example in the case of Kingston Bridge, literally amplifying real-time data of traffic and tidal flows.

ENGINEERING AND INNOVATION

To create these permanent public art projects, both artists have developed highly engineered processes, structural, electrical, and systems-oriented. Although Echelman's work is about adapting to nature rather than controlling it, the engineering intervention must be highly controlled to achieve the necessary safety standards and aesthetic goal. From pre-visualization to final programming Schwendinger's process alternates between engineered calculation and hands-on mock-up. Developmental processes are invented as the project vision requires and absorbed into the artist's approach. For example, for *Dreaming in Public* the previsualization of mixing color upon a series of near-transparent canvases in an exterior volume required a dimensional modeling process and a new way of annotating decisions.

DIALOGUES: ARCHITECTURAL CONTEXT, COLLABORATION, URBAN DESIGN

These projects insert fresh dynamic elements into existing urban environments. This contrast helps to highlight the nature of the urban environment by bringing attention to the areas that we no longer notice, the visual white noise of highway underpasses or urban infrastructure. The newly inserted object creates a dialogue with many layers of cultural reference in architecture and urban space. Both artists have found a way to leave the viewers unencumbered: views are not blocked and movement through a space is free. The viewers' relationship to the artwork is participatory, an invitation to discover a new way of relating to the urban context.

Collaboration is a given for large-scale interventions. As artists we are finding that the context for collaborative consideration is growing evermore wide. Multiple entities due for consideration are art commissions, space/site/city designer/planners, engineers, stakeholders (such as surrounding owners and space users), municipal agencies, and more.

Our job as innovative public artists extends outward from the kernel concept of the work to a myriad of creative and administrative relationships in order to achieve our artistic goals.