

## **Light as an artist's medium**

Documentation strategies, capturing the “immaterial” intentions of the artist

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Created within the framework of the European research project  
Inside Installations: Preservation and Presentation of Installation Art (2004-2007).

research area: documentation strategies

special study: Light

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Publisher: art-documentation.com

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May 2007

## Introduction

Since the 20th century, the medium of light has been direct and indirectly employed in art as a means of creative expression.

The spectrum of artworks effected by this development spans from self-illuminated light objects to light installations and light rooms. A more precise differentiation and classification of these categories and the terminology required for such purposes is currently being developed. Terms that have been employed for these purposes to date include:

- Light object (also: kinetic)
- Light sculpture
- Light installation
- Light - space - installation
- Light ensemble (also: automated)
- Kinetic light
- Neon image
- Light space
- Video installation
- Light environment

The above terminology only allows for an imprecise categorisation by means of generic terms.

The classification and description of these particular installation forms is made more difficult by the fact that different light components (projection, reflection, light rays, etc.) are very often combined with other elements into a unique form of expression.

The registration and documentation of the technical parameters of such art works is essential, however in many instances insufficient.

Further documentation techniques such as the measurement of luminous intensity or light density and colour temperature are complicated by overlapping light sources and therefore require additional documentation strategies.

Attempts to employ descriptive categories to achieve a differentiated analysis of the complex relationships between light, space, the relation of light to the object and the spectator's perception, are an additional means of documentation. Such documentation can be seen as a supplement or alternative to a description and measurement of the individual light components.

Determining the artist's intentions is another important measure to fill the gaps in documentation that is based solely on the material, technical and architectural parameters of a work of art.

This text does not attempt a comprehensive account of this highly complex subject. Instead, it attempts—with the help of a short discussion of several examples—to illustrate approaches to the documentation of relevant components involved in light installations and to discuss additional aspects and descriptive categories.

A record of the artist's intentions by means of an interview with the artist, with reference to the mode of presentation of their work and its variables, is not addressed here. However, such interviews should be part of a documentation strategy.

## Documentation strategies

Works of art that directly or indirectly depend on the medium of light utilise both the space itself as well as the viewer and their various vantage points. Such elements heighten the spectator's perceptions and awareness of space.

The perception of a light object / light installation is not exclusively determined by the light component (illuminant, luminous intensity, colour temperature) employed by the artist. It is also affected by site-specific and architectural

conditions. The space accordingly plays a decisive role in the perception of a work of art. The dimensions of the space (height, width, depth) and its surface conditions (colour, texture, reflective qualities) effect the absorption and reflection of light and can have a major impact on colour temperatures and the appearance of projections. Site-specific conditions can have a decisive impact on the medium of light and the intentions of the artist. The space itself becomes a temporary medium.

The viewer's perception is influenced by entrance locations, adjacent spaces, the quality of light and the affective qualities of a space.

By virtue of constant lighting elements with fixed positions and light angles, the perception of an artwork and the medium of light are relatively constant in a space that has been determined by the artist. The perception of installations that are modified according to a particular exhibition space is subject to a number of variables. These often involve the inclusion of existing (partly modified) lighting conditions (daylight, artificial light) to create a specific atmosphere and influence the viewer's perception.

A precise documentation (by means of photography) supplemented by a textual description of the space that takes into account surfaces that reflect or absorb light is one means by which the space's atmosphere can be described. This helps to analyse possible interrelations between space and light.

Documentation based on technical lighting components, light attributes and colour temperatures, and the measurement of the quality of light within a given space is in many cases insufficient. Depending on the work of art, it may even be irrelevant.

Several documentation parameters are essential in order to analyse the artist's intentions and perception with regard to a particular site-specific installation. These are necessary in order to reconstruct or reinstall such work. The relevance of each individual parameter should be determined with respect to the installation in question.

#### Parameters to be employed during documentation

- Documentation of the artist's intentions
  - textual description; supplementary photographic documentation
- Documentation of the viewer's perspective
  - textual description; supplementary video documentation and/or 3D panoramic documentation
- Documentation of the space
  - Floorplan
  - Documentation of surface conditions
  - Wall, floor, ceiling (shadow gaps, recesses and protrusions)
  - Material, texture, reflective qualities, colours
- Documentation of light elements and their components
- Documentation of the position of individual components
- Documentation of the "mode of operation"
  - Where appropriate, documentation of the reflection, absorption or refraction of light caused by the space with respect to individual objects: artist's intentions and/or site-specific conditions (variable or static).
- Measurement of individual luminous components
  - light values and colour temperature

- Measurement of light values and colour temperatures within the space

(atmosphere within the space, quality of light within the space)

In addition to a description of a given space and its affective qualities, a differentiated description of the mode of operation of the lighting components and their appearance within the work of art and the space is another documentation strategy ("mode of operation" describes the functions that are fulfilled by light components in accordance with the intentions of the artist). The problem of an overlap between different lighting components can be approached in a more precise way by a functional technical description, a description of the overall impression, and a description of the artist's intentions. With the help of these measures the work of art can be reconstituted more precisely for future reinstallation.

### Example 1: Light as an artist's medium



Artist: Edgar Arceneaux  
Title: Drawings of Removal  
Date: 1999— (ongoing)  
Exhibition: 2004-05, Ludwig Forum Aachen  
Category: Installation

#### Description

Edgar Arceneaux's work engages with the process of memory with respect to his father's home town. The point of

departure and catalyst for the work was a trip that the artist took with his father to his father's home town, a place the son only knew about from stories. Through the process of drawing, the work probes the memories of the father, lasting impressions and the unrecognisable remnants of his father's home town today. Elements are drawn and then erased again, sections are cut out, distributed on the floor or redrawn. The work of art is permanently in flux. This ongoing working process is intensified by the studio character of the installation. Numerous large sheets of paper with drawings and incisions hang from the wall. Pencils, rulers, erasers, paper clippings, books and music CDs—all involved in working through the processes of memory—lie about on the floor. Material that is not being used in this particular phase of the work's production is stored in one corner of the space, next to the installation's packing material.

The area around a working lamp—the artist's vantage point—occupies the centre of the installation. At the base of the lamp lie working utensils, books, a CD player, an empty water bottle, a used coffee cup, etc.

The studio character and working process of the artist (depending on the duration of the exhibition: 2 sessions, each 3-4 days) are an important element of the installation. Previously used and discarded materials remain part of the exhibition as a "packed archive".

The atmosphere of the space is defined by the raw studio character of the work. This real working environment is created anew in each site-specific iteration of the installation by means of readily available furnishings (chairs, table, etc.) in combination with traces of the working process. The working lamps are comprised of 2 light fixtures, clamps, cables, plugs, a multiple-plug extension cord (all components of the installation), and a lamp stand that is always improvised on site. This further reinforces the feel of a working environment while the direction of the lights indicates the area of the installation that the artist has most recently been working on.

The lamps can be fixed in variable positions by means of their clamps, and the way that the light direction can thus be modified on vertical or horizontal axes is a functional aspect of the installation.

#### Documentation strategy

- Documentation of the atmosphere of the space: see "Description"

The artist's intentions regarding the affective qualities of the installation can be referred to as "studio-like".

- Documentation: Light (technical components)

For this installation a simple documentation of constituent technical components and their functional variables is sufficient.

#### Relevant Components

- the artist's intentions with regard to light as a medium can briefly be described and photographically documented as:

- Studio situation;

- Lighting arrangement: an indication of the area most recently worked on

In this instance, measurement of the components of the installation that are light sources, and measuring the quality of light in the room are unnecessary.

The atmosphere in the space can be sufficiently documented by means of a textual description and photographs, supplemented by a schematic representation of the installation's layout (positioning: artificial light, daylight).

## Example 2: Light as an artist's medium



Artist: Won Ju Lim  
Title: Longing for Wilmington  
Date: 2000  
Exhibition: Da 2, Salamanca, 2005  
Category: "Light room" installation

### Description

The installation is comprised of architectural forms composed of various orange and blue coloured acrylic components; white foam board elements; 3 slide projections showing night views of 3 different refinery plants; and 2 small adjustable lamps with simple halogen bulbs. The domed head of the lamps can be vertically adjusted and tilted. The dimensions of the space are variable within certain parameters.

The work is positioned between the centre of the space and a suitable wall.

### Projection / Transmission

Three slide projectors showing different night views of a refinery are placed on the floor at the base of 2 walls. Their projections are directed towards the other side of the space, filling the opposite facing walls. In this arrangement the artificial architectural landscape serves as both a projection and, where the projections pass through the transparent acrylic surfaces, a transmission surface. The "real" and artificial architectural landscapes overlap, are displaced. Artificial architecture is overlaid with the many small "light nodes" of "real" architecture in the areas where white foam board has been employed. The projection of the "real" architectural landscape on the walls is overlaid with the outlines and shadows (transmission) of the transparent coloured acrylic modules. The projection and transmission cause both

layers to melt into one another so that it is difficult to distinguish between the real and the artificial.

Illumination / multiple reflections / light atmosphere

By positioning one lamp in each of the blue and orange coloured transparent modules, the artificial architecture is illuminated and the atmosphere of the space and its attendant light qualities are set. The light from the lamps is additionally reflected many times in the transparent elements, thus creating a parallel to the industrial lighting of the "real" architectural landscape. Depending on the spectator's perspective, the focus of perception drifts between the projections on the walls and those on the sculptural object.



The atmosphere and light of the space

The atmosphere of the space and the affective qualities of the light are defined by the conditions of the walls, floor and ceiling. The size of the space also plays a part. The colour of the walls (white) is determined by the artist. The condition of the floor is variable. A dark floor or ceiling influences light and luminosity within the space.

Exhibition case study: DA 2 Salamanca

Relevant components: floor; projection, reflection of the projection

Light is reflected if the floor has a reflective surface. This causes the "artificial" landscape to be reflected in silhouette on the surface of the floor. The artificial industrial landscape thus takes on additional depth and presence. The aura of the work of art is increased by these reflections. Such reflections cause the floor and floor qualities to become a projection surface for light as a medium. They are integrated into the work of art itself, albeit only for the temporary duration of each respective exhibition.

The perception of the spectator

Relevant components: floor, reflection of the projection

The perception of the spectator is influenced by reflections in the floor surface and the impression of depth that this creates around the artificial industrial landscape.

Relevant components: entrance on the right hand side

When entering the space the shadows and projections on the rear wall are at once the focus of attention. The spectator's gaze then drifts between the wall projections and the industrial landscape in the foreground. Advancing into the space, the spectator's gaze is drawn to the orange coloured light source in the rear left area of the installation: the spectator's perception is drawn towards the rear left area of the architectural landscape and the nearby projections on the walls behind it. The spectator then focuses on further projections in the middle of the front wall and the right hand side of the architectural landscape. Depending on the spectator's position, when approaching the orange area to the rear and left and on closer inspection, reflections of the lamp can be seen in the orange modules while circling the light source.

This sequence of spectators' perceptions would be altered if the entrance were to be located on the left hand side of the space (the location of the entrance and its implications for the spectator's perception and the artist's intentions are yet to be elaborated in an interview with the artist).

"Mode of operation"

Slide projectors:

- Function 1: Projection: presentation of slides  
Projection surface: architectural form, wall, ceiling
- Function 2: Transmission: representation of acrylic elements as colour "projections"  
Projection surface: wall  
Representation of shadowed outlines (foam board elements)

Small lamps:

- Function 1: Illumination of architectural form (sculpture)
- Function 2: Light qualities, colours of the space (orange/blue)
- Function 3: Multiple reflections of light sources and reflective hoods onto the coloured transparent elements.

## Conclusion

It is possible to generate a description of each site-specific scenario, including the atmosphere of the space and the interaction between the space, the work of art and the spectator. Such descriptions can be compiled with respect to the variables and site-specific qualities pertaining to each space, and later integrated into a corresponding conservation and presentation strategy.

Documentation of the light and atmosphere of a space—as well as the elements constituting their effects—can be achieved with the aid of video or spherical panoramic photography. These methods are useful as visual supplements to a textual description. They determine the light and atmospheric conditions in a particular space, as well as their variables with respect to the different elements that they are constituted by.

Working with an artist on the analysis and interpretation of different variables effecting the presentation of their artwork is and should remain important. Although the protocols and processes for these purposes are still in the process of being developed, they are a significant part of the work's future conservation and presentation strategy.