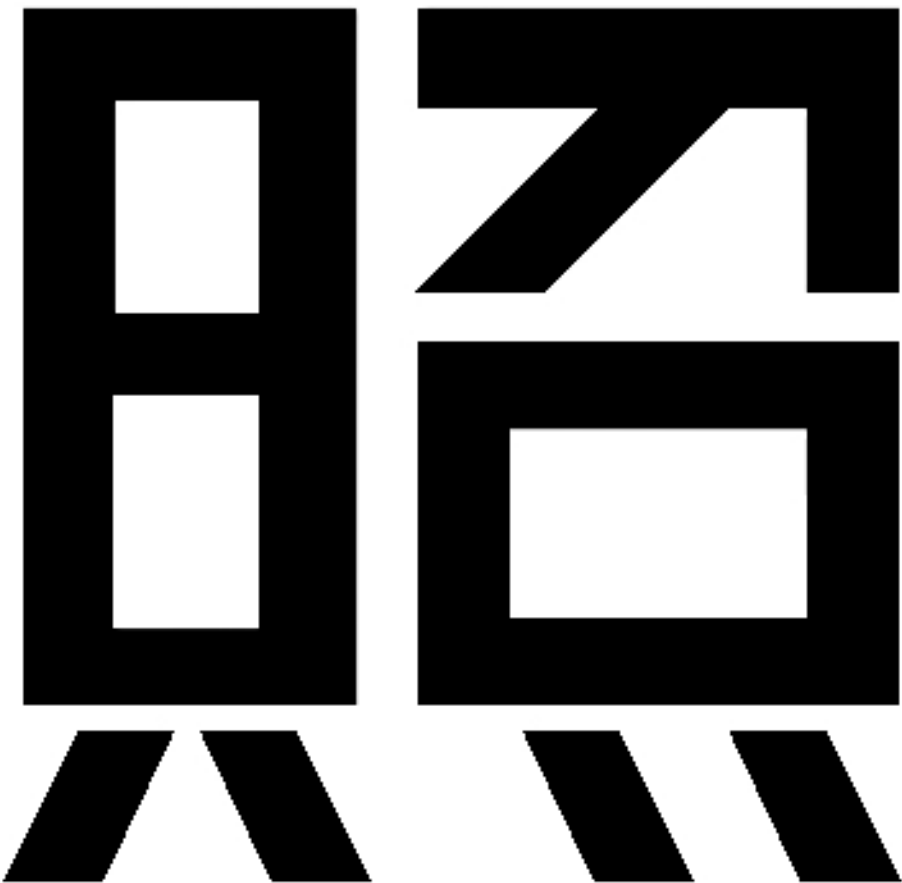


pld-china

professional lightning design magazine

interview

in-between Carol Chang, chief editor & LAb[au]
march 2009



Interview 2009

Interview:

Carol Chang, editor of PROFESSIONAL LIGHTING DESIGN magazine

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LAB[au]

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1. Could you please describe your job to us?

Since it's founding in 1997 LAB[au], laboratory for architecture and urbanism, explores digital architecture and MetaDesign focusing on the question "how technologies of computation and communication transform the construct of space on the level of its perception, interaction and meaning". LAB[au] projects span across a broad spectrum, in between the experimental and theoretical works typical to a laboratory to works of production (bau = the construction). Our agency name LAB[au] is thus the result of different readings and pronunciations _ the one of the French phonetic writing of laboratory, 'labo' standing for a place of artistic and technological experimentation and research, and the German reading of 'bau' which stands for construction and production. From this perspective, our references reside in the experimental and technological approach of art, such as the cybernetic art of the sixties and more specifically the work of Nicolas Schöffer among many others.

Further on, the use of 'Bau' isn't innocent and directly refers to the Bauhaus movement which for us stands as a breaking point in the artistic quest to examine and rearticulate the technological progress in relation to artistic practice and aesthetics. Their approach that led to industrial design stood for an artistic practice based on methods according to a technological advance, the industrial revolution, which shares a lot of common points to the questions we face nowadays according to the current "information age" revolution. Their methodological and reductionistic approach to research a proper aesthetic and practice of design is a solid ground for our work. Therefore we describe our work as "MetaDesign" describing this form of research in relation to advanced technologies of computation and communication.

2. Could you please talk about your understanding of interactive art and design?

What characteristics does interactive art have and how did interactive art and design begin and grow?

Considering interactive art and design is a critical quest on how the technological progress of the last decades influences our daily lives, the space we live in and the relation we have with our environment. For example the use of interactive technologies in the enlightening installation project "touch" on the Brussels Dexia Tower allowed each visitor not only to influence in real time the light on the 145m high skyscraper with its 4200 individual enlightened windows but also to involve him in the concept of the project itself. The proposed 'communication chain' offered each citizens the possibility to experience a new form of relation between him, the building and public space, as the scale of the project also involved him in the city image, which each user could retrieve in form of an electronic greeting card showing its own interaction. The use of interactive design thus questions the relation / representation of our environment allowing us to reevaluate fundamental architectural concepts such as the relation between object/subject, its representation and the role of public space.

The different projects of the Dexia Tower have been grouped under the concept of a contemporary interpretation of a 'cybernetic tower' and as such directly refer to cybernetic art, one of the main historic influences of interactive design. Further on, the use of an elementary language of points, lines and surfaces within the design of the interactivity can be related to the systematic and parameter-based art practiced during the Bauhaus movement, not because its protagonists researched interactivity, but a systematic parameter-based approach towards art.

3. Currently, what are the main forms and techniques of interactive art?

There are many different techniques and a valid classification needs a longer reflection. The 'Touch' project mentioned earlier can give some aspects interactive design is involved with. As a team we encompass all the knowledge and the expertise necessary to accomplish such a project, inclusive and not limited to software programming, electronics design and production, sensor design, network and communication design. One could say that the forms and techniques involved in interactive art are as broad as technology and science are. However as main tendencies you can say computer based art / light art as the "touch" project is one of the main categories, kinetic (motion based / mechanical is another one (as for example our Binary Wave or f555 projects), network-based art (also named Net-Art) another long lasting category, with more exotic forms focused on the usage of smart materials or on bio engineering.

4. What is the connection between interactive art and architecture and urban design? How does the interactive art influence the development of architecture and urban design?

The notions of body, matter, space and time are nowadays increasingly defined by the unit of information; its structures, processes and systems introducing new parameters of space and time - presence, such as immersion (real/virtual) and interaction (real-time/entropy) as well as new parameters of materiality (nano-technologies and smart memory materials) or biological (gene technologies) ones in its definition. The fusing of sophisticated industrial production methodologies and materials, as genetic engineering, product design (imagineering)...with digital media binds together aesthetics with living materials - us included - and information technologies, opening a huge scientific and artistic field of exploration for new cultural codes and semantics.

From this point of view IC technologies influence our entire daily live and thus all practices which are concerned in the design of artefacts. In times of such change it may not be relevant to think in categories and disciplines but rather to look how different artistic practices allow us to reflect on the ongoing progress. Triggered by technological advances, new codes (semantics) and methods (practice) appear. This is why we define our practice as MetaDesign which can be defined as a practice grounded on the inherent logics of computation and communication technologies in the visualization and formalization of inFORMation processes in textual, graphical, spatial and multi-dimensional representations. It is a practice drawn from concepts of communication and information sciences with that of process methods, design, visual and spatial constructs – art and architecture.

5. Is light the common use of the interactive art and design? Why?

Light is definitely not a medium specific to interactive art. One could argue that interactive art is mainly about sound or mechanical systems (think robots) but it is true that in our case light is one of our favorite medium. It displays some interesting features mainly because of its dynamic properties, that it can be driven electronically (think leds) and as such easily be interfaced with computer systems. Screen-based interactive art is probably the most common, yet and even if screens/projectors are lighting devices, a more specific approach on light which focuses on its qualities is existing independently. In short, light as medium can't be separated from the development of communication and computation technologies, it is coherent to its inherent process and further allows us due to these properties to easily display them in space and time.

6. Do you think interactive art could combine with the architecture lighting design? How?

New media, digital design will more and more take part in the construct of space / architecture, a state where its conception directly includes the question of interaction design, interfaces & software developments, information architecture... These developments will play a major role in tomorrow design / architecture. Back in 2007, the design of the 'Touch' project was only possible due to our own hardware, the 1.7 x 0.8 multi-touch screen, and software development. This development allowed us further to layout the project for an outside and urban use and shifted the development from a technological device to the design of an enlightened urban pavilion. Due to the fact that we could cover the entire conception and realization process we could encounter the development with more design and conceptual considerations; actually it allowed us to 'design' a coherent project, not a technology, according to the contextual, technological and conceptual parameters. Therefore we think that interactive design is less a question of a specific technology but rather the ability to encounter technology with conceptual, artistic...concerns embracing these technologies with a wider meaning. For us the question of what makes such a technology 'popular' is not the use of a new fancy technology but our abilities to integrate and to understand its potentials for contemporary design / architecture. In regards to the 'Touch' project we think that its qualities reside in the manner we used technology to create new forms of architectural representation and public space based on interactivity design. For us this interactivity design is far more than the development of a specific hard/software technology but the development of a global project including cultural, conceptual and aesthetic considerations.

7. How, you expect, interactive art and design will develop?

Interactivity in itself does not mean much; it is the context and the manner it is articulating the human body with this context that constitutes the artistic proposal. As such, I would expect interactive art to slowly percolate into other forms of art and, in parallel, to continue evolving alongside our technological, social and cultural mutations.