

## The Maja Petrić Interview



**Maja Petrić** is an artist working at interface of science, technology and art. She holds a Doctorate in Digital Art and Experimental Media (DXARTS) from University of Washington, a Masters degree in new media art from New York University, Tisch School of the Arts, Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP), and a Masters degree in journalism from University of Zagreb, Croatian Studies. She has recently been nominated for the 2015 International Light Art award in honor of the “International Year of Light 2015”

Sarah Adams talks to her about her background, influences and her work in transforming poetic experience

of space through light.

**You describe your art as stemming from the desire to transform space and experience. Where does this desire come from and what are you trying to achieve?**

My work has been on transforming the poetic experience of space through light. I became interested in the experience of art as I was growing up in Croatia during the war. I was nine years old when the war broke out in my country. In the following five years many places in Croatia and neighboring Bosnia were devastated. Great buildings were ruined, in some places entire villages were razed to the ground. With the fallen architecture people also fell, and the entire region was overpowered by fear and despair. Growing up in such an environment made me dream of happier places. In my dreams I repaired broken things and saw fragmented landscapes as whole. Being around patched-up things felt better than being surrounded by chaos and disorder in an environment of helplessness. This reconstruction was not literal, it happened in my mind. My imagination transported me from the disturbing realities to a place of awe and wonders that I recognize as sublime.

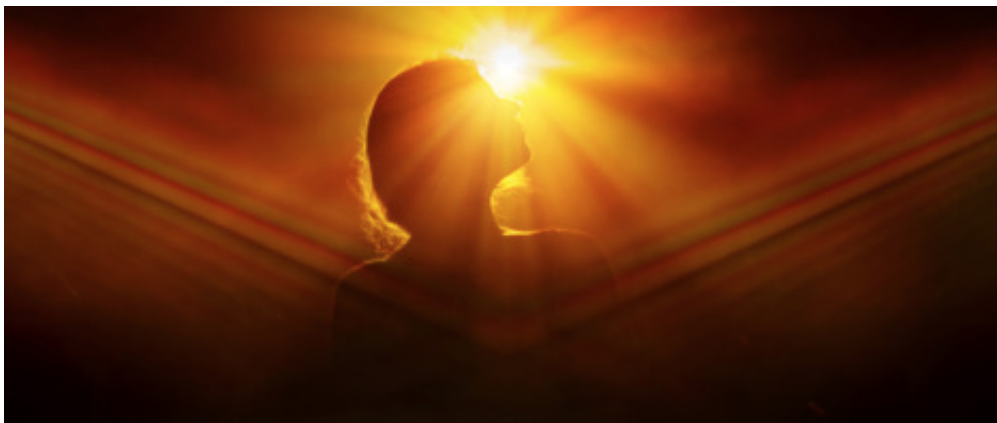


Once I started practicing art, my preoccupation was to create environments that transport others into a realm of awe and wonder. One of the first larger examples was outSIDEin, an interactive light installation that I created in year 2006 to transform the atmosphere of the utterly shattered pedestrian tunnel at New York City Subway's 191st Street station of the number 1 train, also known as the tunnel of doom. I used artificial light to simulate a striking natural effect of light emanating from the sky, which was projected through false cracks of the ceiling in the pedestrian tunnel. Lights were programmed to imitate the color and intensity of the daylight outside of the tunnel. When the weather outside was very sunny, the light projected inside through the cracks was bright and yellow. When the weather outside was foggy, the light was blue. The outside space creeping into the inside of the underground tunnel came as unexpected delight to random passers by. As such, it transformed the moment of experience and served as an ontological comment of our everyday inhospitable spaces. This concept proved that technology, which has in many ways detached us from our native habitat, can also be employed in service of inciting a feeling of the sublime related to nature within urban spaces. This led me to deeper investigations on the topic.

### **You have a Doctorate in Digital Art and Experimental media – what was your thesis about?**

My doctoral thesis 'Transforming the Poetic Experience of Space Through Light' investigated theoretical and practical artistic methods of manipulating light through which the space is experienced cognitively and emotionally. The focus was on innovating lighting to engage perception, emotion, memory, and imagination.

Accumulated theoretical and practical body of knowledge was summed up and reflected in the light and electroacoustic installation Horizon is an Imaginary Line that expanded the lighting apparatus into immersive perceptual hyperspace. The piece utilizes beams of light emitted from projectors positioned around a darkened space that is filled with haze and fog. Homogeneous clouds suspended in the air make light beams visible and appear perceptible by touch. These palpable light beams travel from the projector lamp across the space and form dynamic light spaces that change based on video that is projected into the state of the haze. The videos are designed to sculpt the light while emulating the vast scale of the universe and sublimity of nature.



The soundscape was composed by Daniel Peterson. It is an electroacoustic counterpoint to the experience of kinetic light that enhances the ambience of space by appearing at the threshold of perception and then morphing over time. Moving beams of light are simultaneously physical and ephemeral, figurative and abstract, still and dynamic.



Phenomenal experience of light and sound is nearly impossible to capture as they change based on the state of the fog and viewers position. Each visitor creates a silhouette in space that contributes to the total sensation of the piece, integrating the visitor's presence into the aesthetic experience. As visitors move, their figures at times block haze and fog and moving image, which provide them with an opportunity to interact with the environment and make an immediate influence on it. The play of light across the space that visitors enter also transforms perception of bodies present in the piece.

### **From the beginning you chose light as the expressive media in your works – why is this?**

Since I started creative practice I looked into ways to transform the poetic experience of space. During experimentations across different media I discovered that light is an immensely potent tool to create poetic transformations of environments, and this led me to study and practice how to manipulate senses by calibrating properties of light in purpose of art.

What fascinates me the most about the essential nature of light is that it is ubiquitous – it is a source of life, it is everywhere and affecting everything. It is also ephemeral – ever-changing, dynamic, in constant transformation; and mysterious. It can't be touched, but it can be felt, and to this day we cannot entirely grasp light. When utilising light as a creative tool I look into ways of manipulating these ubiquitous, ephemeral, and mysterious properties.

### **Can you foresee a time when media and/or responsive architecture in the context of lighting is the norm? What is your vision and/or hope for the future?**

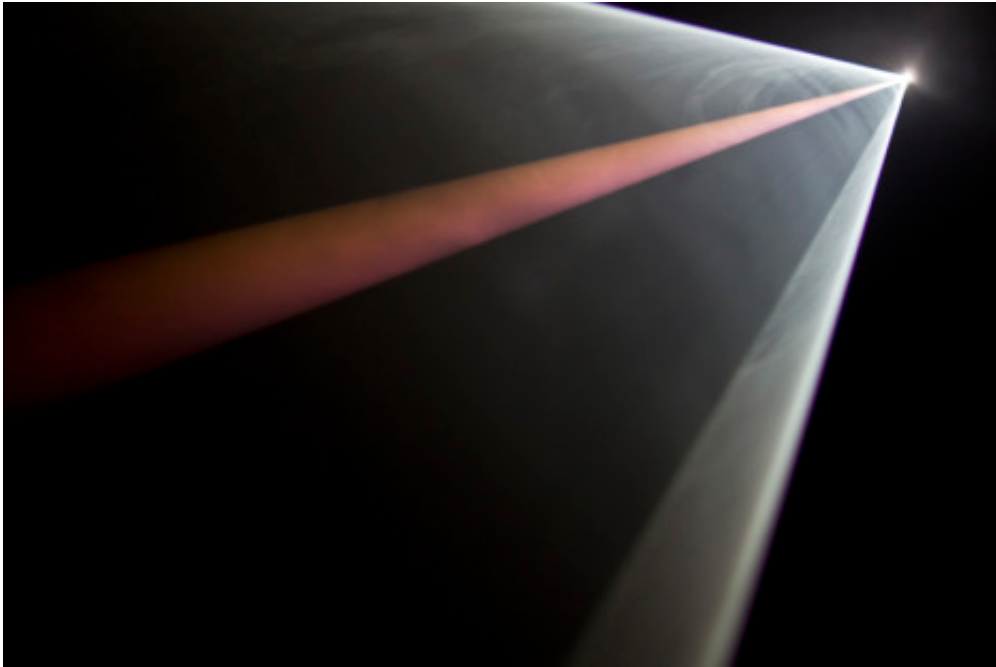
Lighting technology is rapidly becoming more advanced and affordable, but our knowledge about how to treat and utilize light is hugely underdeveloped and abstracted. My hope and expectation is that the knowledge we have on light becomes much more integrated. There are many disciplines focused on light but most of them work in isolation which leaves light extremely abstracted. I hope to see interdisciplinary approach where physicist, biologists, designers, astronomers, architects, engineers, psychologists, artists, etc. share their knowledge and work together in purpose of achieving holistic understanding of light. This could lead to exciting treatments of light in architecture, design, and art.

### **How do you manage to stay on top of developments in materials and technology?**

There is only one way to stay on top of technological advancement and that is by creating new works. Through this you research the best technological solutions and collaborate with other specialists in purpose of those works. Technology and light for me are tools and they are used to fulfill the function that is dictated by artistic intentions of the specific work. Most of the time I am evolving the tools I have been working with for a while, but many times new works ask for a new invention of tools in order to achieve the idea.



Currently I am working on a new and interactive version of the Horizon is an Imaginary Line light art installation. This new version will be developed at Microsoft Research in Seattle later this year. There I will have an opportunity to work with cutting edge technology and world-class technologists.



I will be learning from them and together we are going to engineer responsive light mechanism by use of motion tracking system that will detect visitors' movement in space. Visitors will be captured on camera and the video of them will be reduced to image of their silhouettes that will be project back to them into the space filled with haze. This will create seemingly tangible halo of light around visitors in the shape of their bodies. Each visitor will create a "light space" by being present in the space. As they move across the space, the light will be extruded in the shape of them, living light trails of their presence across the space. At specific times these volumetric light shapes will be composed to morph into shapes of different people and other shapes.

### **Can you describe a favourite project of yours and why?**

My favorite project is Horizon is an Imaginary Line, because it was the most complete transformation of the space into a poetic experience that I have achieved. This was evident by the overwhelming reactions of the visitors. The piece embodied all the significant theory and practice I have been developing in the last sixteen years, and demonstrated the value of such creative research. It was a complex project that was fun to create, extremely gratifying to observe in interaction with people, and it allows for more possibilities of new editions such as the interactive one I mentioned before that I will be developing with Microsoft Research.

I am also excited about the piece Skies, a light art installation depicting the sky and it's ever-changing nature. It is consisted of seven boxes that are individually programmed to evoke changes in the sky resembling transition from sunrise to sunset. The same state of the sky is never repeated just as it is always unique in nature.



The exciting part is that the piece is going global. The expanded edition of the Skies is called Skies Atlas and includes additional light art objects that are modeled on the original Skies but made to artistically interpret different kinds of sky.



The installation will be initiated by creation of six artistic interpretations of six skies, each typical for one of six different locations and one of six main climates of the world. The goal is to keep on expanding number of the Skies by creating light art objects that depict the view of it from many more locations. We live under one sky but the view of it is different depending on when and from where we are looking at it. The Skies Atlas aims to artistically collect and unite the numerous views of the sky. It is fun to create art that connects different places and focuses on the beauty and diversity of the space that we all share.

### **Do you monitor the reactions to your works in any way?**

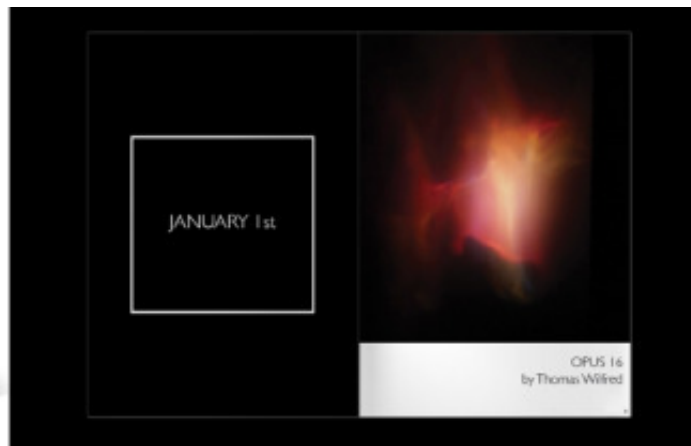
Yes, this is important for any work that is made for other people, and especially in my case where I look to impact perception, engage the imagination and emotion of others. This process starts with self-monitoring and observing the mechanics of my own perception and response to my own works. As an author, I know my work inside out, which can cause me to become desensitized to it. But my goal is to create works that have lasting effects and that are ever-changing. Therefore, I believe that my work is effective when it engages me even after I have been working on it day-in day-out. I proceed by observing reactions of others and what attracts people in different situations. This is the key methodology of human-centric design that I aim for as part of my immersive and interactive art.



**You have been nominated for an IYOL Award – what does this mean for you? Are you doing other things in relation to the Year of Light?**

Being nominated for an IYOL Award is an honor. Such recognition is especially meaningful coming from the world's first museum dedicated to advocating the importance of systemising knowledge about light art, the Centre for International Light Art Unna. As an artist working with light as a tool I find essential to understand light as a material as well as the examples of creative uses of light in history across different art disciplines and further. In this regard the mission of the Centre for International Light Art Unna helping immensely.

My own tribute to the IYOL has been a project Light Art A Day, publication on relevant artworks that utilize light that I have been researching for the last sixteen years. During the entire IYOL (2015,) I am publishing daily via social internet platforms one significant artwork that relays on use of light. The collection of these references will be also published as a book.



### **What are you working on right now?**

I am currently working on couple of projects in the same time, including preparing the book Light Art A Day, developing sketches for the interactive version of Horizon is an Imaginary Line, and creating new editions of the Skies Atlas project. During the summer I will be working with lighting designer Lara Elbaz on creative research about healing properties of light combined with healing properties of art in purpose of inventing healing light art.

I am guided by the power of art to embody the essence of life that cannot be articulated otherwise and evoke sensations that engage body, mind, imagination and emotion. Such power can transform feelings, perceptions, moods and thoughts. If used properly, it can help heal. The growing scientific evidence confirms that light is healing too. Historically, the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans used light as a medicine. Today scientists are uncovering exactly how it medically heals and expanding the light therapy apparatus. Lara and I will be systemizing our knowledge on these topics and offer them in form of both theoretical and practical work.





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