



**PUBLIC  
ARTIST#**



ALL IMAGES COURTESY REFIK ANADOL

*Refik Anadol aims to engage both hemispheres of the brain with his art. He likes the meeting ground between poet and tech nerd. On the one hand, he appeals to pure emotion and subjective experience. He likes to make work that can be seen by large groups of pedestrians just passing through; his intention is to stop them in their tracks. He wants viewers to feel something; to have a question, perhaps—and sometimes the question will simply be: how'd he do that?*

Words: Katya Tylevich.



The Turkish-born, LA-based artist Refik Anadol personally convinced architect Frank Gehry in 2014 that the famous Walt Disney Concert Hall would make a great canvas for a site-specific visual concert. At the time, Anadol couldn't show the architect exactly what he was proposing; after all, it would be the direct and spontaneous result of the music and movements of an evening's performance. Gehry eventually agreed to Anadol's experiment, as did the Los Angeles Philharmonic and, various pens put to paper later, Anadol realized a breakthrough project before even turning thirty.

For a concert of Edgard Varèse's *Amérique*, he flooded the Disney Center Hall with his Gehry-specific visual accompaniment via a custom-built sound analysis algorithm that listens and responds to music in real time; he also captured the movements of the conductor to influence the resulting light projection.

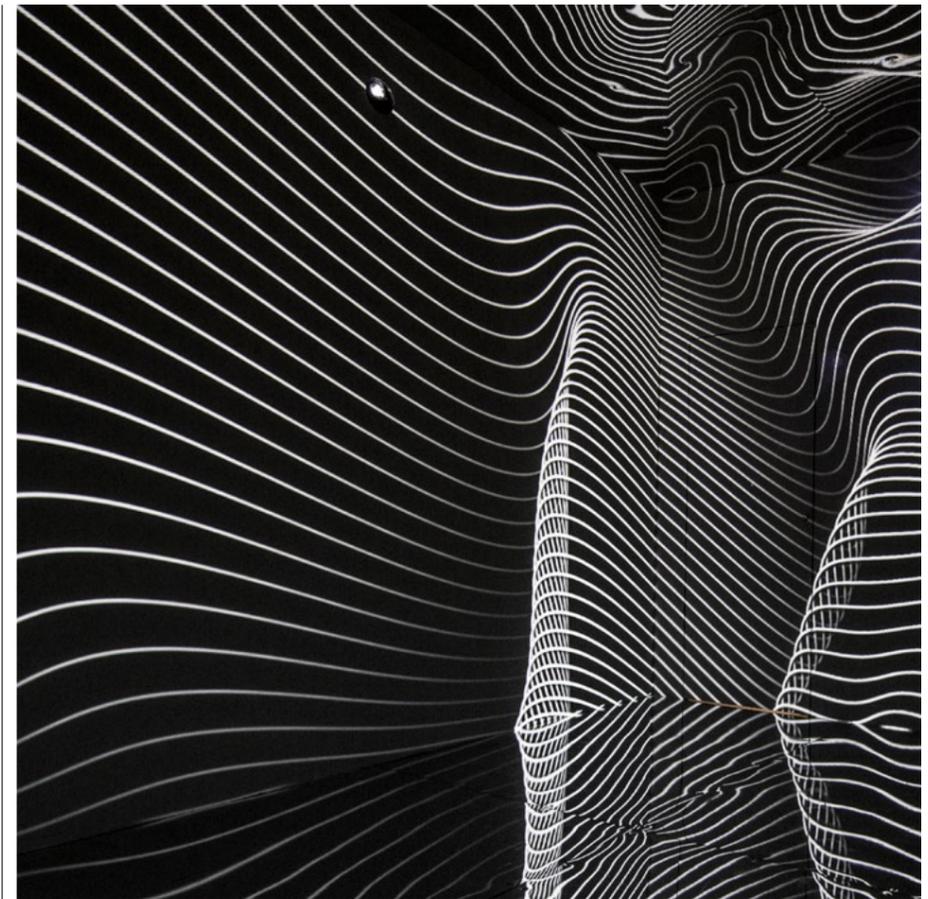
Anadol still can't believe that he actually pulled it off. But in his studio today, located in LA's eastside, the artist has the highly detailed model of Gehry's building to prove that he did.

Anadol's art isn't simply the product of hard work and long hours burning the conceptual oil—owing to its large practical scope, the number of people and types of buildings involved, and the question marks that follow the use of very new technologies, Anadol's works are usually group efforts, requiring both logical and spiritual support. That part, he doesn't mind at all. His only qualm is with being pigeonholed as a one-medium tech artist (projection doesn't have to be the means of every project, just because it works for some). Quite simply, Anadol prefers to call himself a public artist and leave the definition broad. He will, however, also respond to the names media artist and designer.

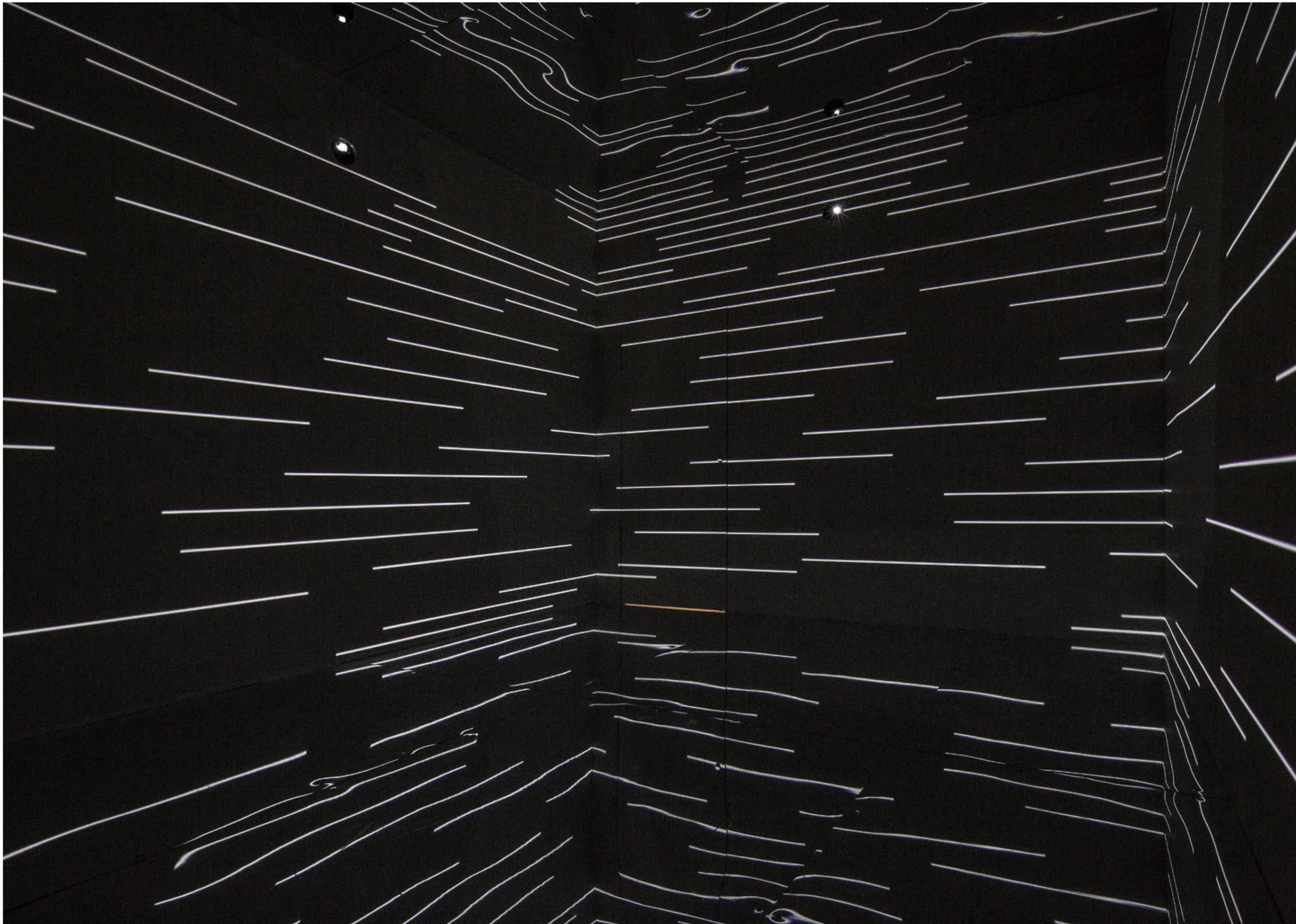
Anadol's work is the result of his amassed knowledge of various technologies and scientific studies. He says he must always stay a student. In a recent project called *Infinity Room*, Anadol used algorithms to create a room on site, in which a person perceives a non-physical world whose conventional spatial qualities are broken. He has been told that the experience of this project, as of others, is reminiscent of a drug trip. He respectfully disagrees: rather than an escape from reality or a hallucination, he is interested in providing a confrontation with what's practically there.

In his studio, where Anadol and I meet for very strong coffee and a long conversation, the artist tells me he isn't interested in using technology to glue more faces to more screens; he hopes instead that his artworks can be a reason to look up and around for a change.

*Given the technology and architecture woven into your works, your projects require enormous teams and trust—both on your end and from whomever has commissioned your work. What is your role as artist, given these circumstances?*



**“I THINK PUBLIC ART MAY BE THE ONLY TRULY OPEN, NON-COMMERCIALIZED, HONEST ART FIELD LEFT IN THE WORLD”**



Media art is unconcerned with traditional definitions of an artist. As a media artist, you also need to be a designer, maybe an architectural designer—certainly you need to be aware of material and technology. I didn't know that when I was just beginning, but I've come to understand that there is nothing inherently wrong with combining different modes of information. Yes, I need to learn how to use a Sinar technical camera, and to shoot 4K, how to use a drone and Oculus. I need to learn coding and make my own computer, design in Keynote, record sound, and also, in some cases, I need to know how to paint. I've also had to learn how to prepare food for my team when we're working long hours. [Laughs.] I have no problem being involved in every single step.

*That seems at odds with the romantic idea of the solitary artist in his studio.*

I tend to refer to myself as a public artist—because, really, my ultimate intention is making art for public viewing—but how I work is probably closer to architecture rather than anything in the fine arts. Architects need to gain trust from their clients and to trust their own teams: they need material engineers to choose the best material (which won't simply deteriorate in twenty years), they need structural engineers to hold the building together, the list goes on. I have to rely on similar experts. The reality is also that budgets are usually very different in fine art, as opposed to the work I do, which includes architecture, engineering, technology... You can't do what I do without support. That said, I always document artworks by myself. What remains at the end of the day is the level of communication achieved by the work. Especially if a work is not permanent, then the final product, despite everything that went into it, is the idea.

*Your physical work, permanent or not, is always very site-specific. What about the idea? Is there a permanence to it?*

The *Mona Lisa* will never change, but I hope that all parts of my works do, depending on the context. I've had the "same" idea move from Istanbul to Houston, Paris, Sydney and Tokyo. Not only is each city different, but so is the site I'm given and how people access it; I have to reconsider how I present the project in a new way for each exhibition.

*Since you exhibit across different cities and countries and the idea has to change, do you also notice that reaction to it changes? Do you notice differences in ways people experience your work depending on geography and culture?*

Interestingly, I don't see major differences in perception, no. How we perceive and see—many of the so-called "rules" people follow—seem to be embedded in all of our DNA and genes, and it's something we share, despite what we've learned in a specific place. I intentionally try to avoid political or culturally divisive elements in

**Opening pages**

*Infinity Room*, 2015  
Zorlu Performing Centre,  
Istanbul, Turkey

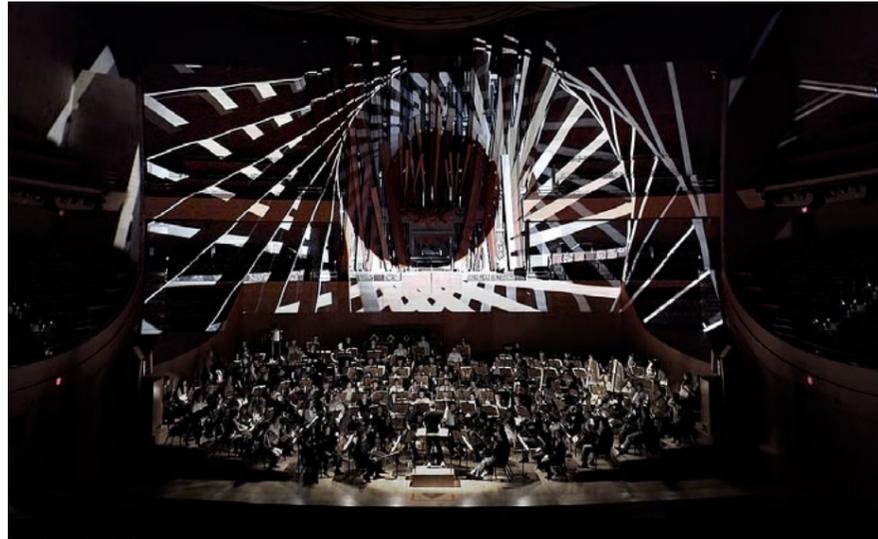
Portrait by Alexei Tylevich

**This page**

*Visions of America: Amériques*  
Audiovisual performance  
conducted by Esa-Pekka  
Salonen, performed by the  
Los Angeles Philharmonic,  
6 November 2014, Walt Disney  
Concert Hall, Los Angeles

**Opposite page**

*Virtual Depictions:*  
San Francisco, 2015  
6mm LED media wall, 90 mins



my work because for me it's more interesting to find what we have in common. You know, there are many geniuses who already talk about our differences very well. I think that finding and discussing commonalities has more potential for me.

*As a general observation, I think viewers often shy away from art that they feel they can't understand; the more abstract, the more daunting. Do you find this to be the case in your use of advanced technology? When people aren't sure how one of your artworks is made—it's not pen on paper, in other words—do you find they approach it with apprehension?*

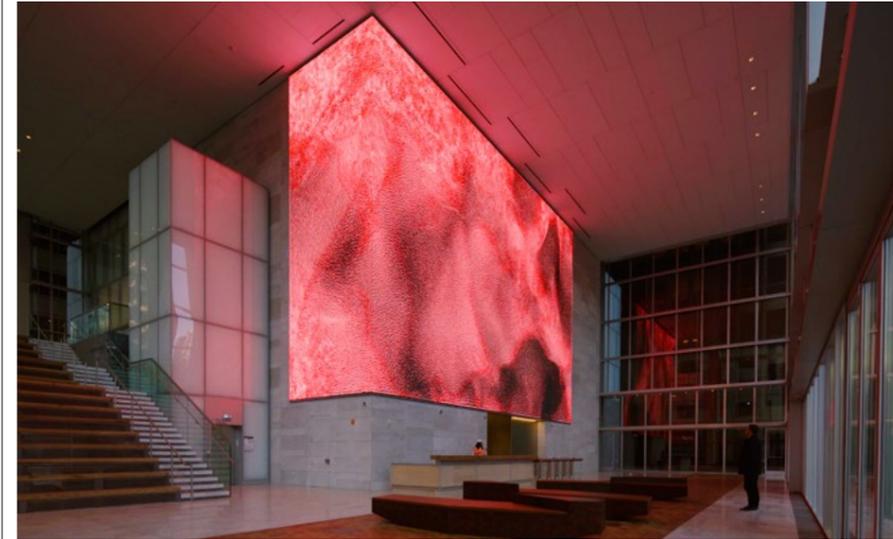
I understand the tendency, but that's really where social media is a blessing. I get a lot of questions about how my work is made and also what my work *means*, and so I rely on important online platforms where I get to hear feedback directly from people and explain the artwork in more detail to them.

I'm not against sharing how my art is made, either. Often it requires many years of work and a process that can't be explained in one post, but I do my best to share what I can, even about the software. My mother is angry about how many people I've become Facebook friends with in the past six months, and the information I share in public. [Laughs.] Maybe it's good to set your own boundaries, but generally, I believe in being open. It's better for the artwork.

*Some artists believe the opposite: that mystery is better for the artwork.*

Okay, fine, I don't want to give away *all* of the know-how of my last eight years of work. Although I don't really care if all of my software is up and running somewhere. [Laughs.]

**“I CAN TRY ALL I WANT,  
BUT I USUALLY CAN'T KEEP  
MY THOUGHTS  
TO MYSELF WHEN I HEAR  
QUESTIONS OR REACTIONS”**



I'm just open to explanation. I'm not hiding anything. I think public art may be the only truly open, non-commercialized, honest art field left in the world, and it allows me the freedom to engage with the viewer in any way that I want.

*What about engaging in person? Do you like to be at the openings of your works?*

Sometimes I try to be invisible in those situations, to hear people speak honestly about what they are experiencing. I can try all I want, but I usually can't keep my thoughts to myself when I hear questions or reactions.

*Do you have projects that you feel closer to above others you've created?*

Oh yes. The LA Phil, the *Infinity Room* and a project in San Francisco called *Virtual Depictions*, which is a data-driven media wall located in the lobby of a prominent building, and embedded in its architecture. Anyone passing outside can see the wall. I was *dying* to do something like this project, which doesn't use projection. I've been trying to step away from that medium a little bit. When you make a [successful] project in one medium, like projection, it just sticks to you. People think that you can only ever work with projected light. That's not a good assumption to have following you around. The truth is, I worked in certain media early on because they are much more affordable, that's why. LA Phil was really great, though: the idea is that even a traditional medium like classical music can be hacked. It's nice to hack things. [Laughs.]

*Do you have a different process when it comes to permanent versus impermanent works?*

Yes. I think the impermanent works can be more experimental and less restricted. On the other hand, a permanent work comes with more liability and responsibility. Permanent is more of a challenge.

*How do you reconcile yourself with the fact that, twenty years from now, the technology of a permanent work might feel dated?*

Yes, the question of eventually feeling dated is a problem for any artist. So far, things have been going well, and the technology I've used is still quite cutting edge. But the antidote to the art aging is contextualization—the potential of writing a history in the media arts.

At UCLA, I studied under [media archaeologist] Erkki Huhtamo. He's awesome. He follows what seems like every single interesting platform used around the world today, and he writes about it. He is one of the editors of the book *Media Archaeology* (2011), so he's recording what's going on in the history of media arts and public art, and I like the idea of becoming part of archaeology, which has been missing from this field. Context like this actually makes innovation easier. Given context, people are more open to experience.