

BAY LIGHTS IGNITE: ONE PART BUSINESS, TWO PARTS PLEASURE

Donna Schumacher

TRACESF
Bay Area Urbanism



Photo by Lucas Saugen, courtesy thebaylights.org

Perched on a bar stool at Sinbad's Pier 2 Restaurant with a friend, I sipped a glass of white wine on a warm spring night. Sinbad's is definitely a touristy establishment with its wonderful view of the Bay Bridge. And that is why I was there—to take in the recently ignited "Bay Lights" project on the Bridge's Western span.

Commissioned by Illuminate the Arts and created by Leo Villareal, the "digital campfire" of 25,000 computer-controlled LED lights stretches a staggering 1.8 miles across the Bay Bridge's western span. Touted as the world's largest LED light sculpture, Villareal's abstract light mural of movement and pattern pulses and glides across the span's north-facing suspension cables. As I lingered in my chair taking in this display, the flickering lights did indeed mesmerize in a way not dissimilar to staring at the dancing flames of a fire. But what does it mean? Is it art, and, if so, is it "good"?

As The New Yorker art critic Peter Schjeldahl once quipped in response to disbelievers of the celebrated Christo and Jean-Claude's monumental installation of 2005, Gates in Central Park, "Of course, ...it is art, ... what else would it be?"

Well, for one, it could be theatrical lighting of the sort encountered on countless civic monuments across the world. The website for the Bridge Lights project makes a comparison to the 100th anniversary lighting of the Eiffel Tower. Former San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom proudly boasted that our Bay Bridge installation has more lights than the Parisian display. Touché!

But light up the Golden Gate Bridge and one would be hard pressed to consider it art. Pretty, yes, but in the tradition of famous architectural illuminations around the world, it would be a celebration of the monument itself—a spotlight, if you will—making more spectacular an already recognizable icon. Indeed, the top of the Trans America building has a tiny spot of light that changes color and is a constant source of personal entertainment from my balcony. I enjoy it, but I would not call it art.

The Golden Gate Bridge is the glamorous and adored beauty of the Bay Area's family of bridges, as recognizable as cable cars and the Trans America pyramid. The Bay Bridge, by contrast, has always been the unappreciated child, toiling daily to get the job done with unsung pragmatism. Admit-

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Leo Villareal testing the lights from his laptop, photo by Lucas Saugen. Courtesy thebaylights.org

tedly, the naughty Eastern span of the Bay Bridge has the future on its side, having failed miserably enough in Loma Prieta to require a seismic facelift which may raise its rank in the family beauty contest. But the Western span has simply taken us home without fanfare or complaint, and it is, perhaps this very difference that elevates the Bay Lights project beyond mere decoration.

Ben Davis, the founder of Illuminate the Arts and self proclaimed “catalyst” for the Bridge Lights project, has a day job as the founder of Words Pictures Ideas, a branding and communications firm whose client base includes Cal Trans, and more specifically, the Bay Bridge retrofit. In Ben Davis’ words, upon acceptance of the Webbie awards for WPI’s work for the Bridge, “Making infrastructure sexy, oh yea!” Cynics of the Bay Bridge Lights project thus might argue that it’s not art, but rather communications and branding meant to market the retrofit that Ben Davis has been hired to promote.

The privately funded Illuminate the Arts (the organization’s name has a definite specificity) raised a whopping 6 million dollars for this project and has 2 million more to go. By capitalizing on a blurring between art and spectacle, between art and design, and between art and investment, they have created a work that is accessible, practical and, dare I say, sexy too. The revenue generated for the city from increased tourism will be impressive, and more than one patron of the piece has used the word “investment” in describing this installation that will be on view for two years. Like the elite condominiums in Manhattan, where art is incorporated into high end developments to lend an air of caché, is it so wrong-minded

to disseminate the fine arts to a broader audience by making it financially feasible? Let’s face it, what is not to love about twinkling lights over the Bay, particularly with the America’s Cup on the way?

In the tradition of the public artworks of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, it is the orchestration of the event that is as important as the work itself. The grand, and often exhaustingly protracted, effort of obtaining approvals, securing funds, fabricating the work, and, ultimately, public viewing of the piece is what lends an air of social practice to the work, and is a large part of what makes it so successful and inspiring.

The execution of Davis’ catalyzing idea to conceive the bridge as a canvas is perhaps even more multi-dimensional than Davis could have imagined. The verticality of the suspension cables and the horizontality of the waves in the water weave together the man made and the natural, the kinetic and the static. That is what mesmerizes. The light mural itself is a means to that end, and as such is important, but secondary to the effect. This is not to undermine the beauty of Villareal’s imagery, which is most powerful when kept minimal, morphing form onto the architectural scale to create an elegant filmic abstraction.

What makes the Bay Lights authentic to San Francisco is not its allusions to banks of fog and schools of fish (which border on the sentimental), but the unique combination of electronic media skills, artistic vision, budget generosity, and creative entrepreneurship that are the region’s hallmarks. In this epicenter of business innovation, where traditional boundaries between creativity and commerce intertwine, the Bay Lights seem a natural manifestation of what we do well. Certainly, the project walks the precarious (and assumed-to-be-at-odds) line between art and business, but does so free of charge, every night until 2 A.M., for the next two years. Rather than questioning the project outright, go grab a slow drink at theAmericano and allow yourself the time to see what it’s all about.

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MANIFEST DESTINY!

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Photos by Cesar Rubio Photography.

The view walking along Bush Street towards downtown San Francisco recalls the exaggerated perspective of a Wayne Thiebaud painting. The sharp crest of the hill forces the gaze forward and down, revealing the urban fabric below where Manifest Destiny! — a 19th-century, smaller than life-size cabin—adheres like a barnacle to the blank façade of 453 Bush Street, three and one half stories up.

Manifest Destiny! is a public art project created by collaborating artists Jenny Chapman and Mark Reigelman, and is supported by Southern Exposure's Off-Site program. Established in 2006 when SoEx was between spaces, Off-Site is not dissimilar to the series of projects proposed by SFMOMA for when construction of their new building will force them out of their Howard Street location in early 2013. While SoEx has subsequently nestled into a new space on 20th Street, they are carrying on the tradition of work beyond the confines of the traditional gallery with their recently established Graue Award, of which Manifest Destiny is the first recipient.

The landscape that surrounds Manifest Destiny! is a hard urban canvas comprised predominantly of brick and terra cotta buildings, dating from shortly after the Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906. To set their work apart, Chapman/Reigelman chose to use vintage barn wood, weathered and aged like kindling. A stovepipe protrudes through the roof of the cabin, implying a fire within that might, at any moment, engulf and consume the structure. In further rebellion against its setting, Manifest Destiny's! front façade is turned 90 degrees away from its street-facing neighbors, looking to the west in (albeit bygone) anticipation. Each night, a solar powered light glows from the interior, as if a resident has

returned after a long day at the farm. Here again the cabin defies its banking district context, where buildings empty out around 6PM, leaving a neighborhood of dark windows and quiet streets.

Manifest Destiny! hovers between abstraction and pastiche. The details of the cabin are simplified enough to distance the work from literal historicity. The lack of an entry door or a ladder from the street confirms the cabin's inaccessibility, as does its diminutive size, which can be gauged by comparing it to the windows of the adjoining building. But the proportions, and the iconic pitched-roof form, evoke the familiar and the domestic. These juxtapositions leave us at the edge of a total suspension of disbelief, to surreal effect.

And then there's its name. Does Manifest Destiny! sound the bugle call of "westward ho!" with its implication of divine sanction for the territorial expansion of the United States? Or has the hostile wilderness been replaced by the high price of real estate in one of the country's most expensive cities? As Occupy Wall Street continues its encampment just steps away from the site of Manifest Destiny! and the homeless tuck themselves in boxes for the night, the implications are ambiguous and provocative.

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Manifest Destiny! will remain on view through October 27.

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