

# CITY FLICKERS

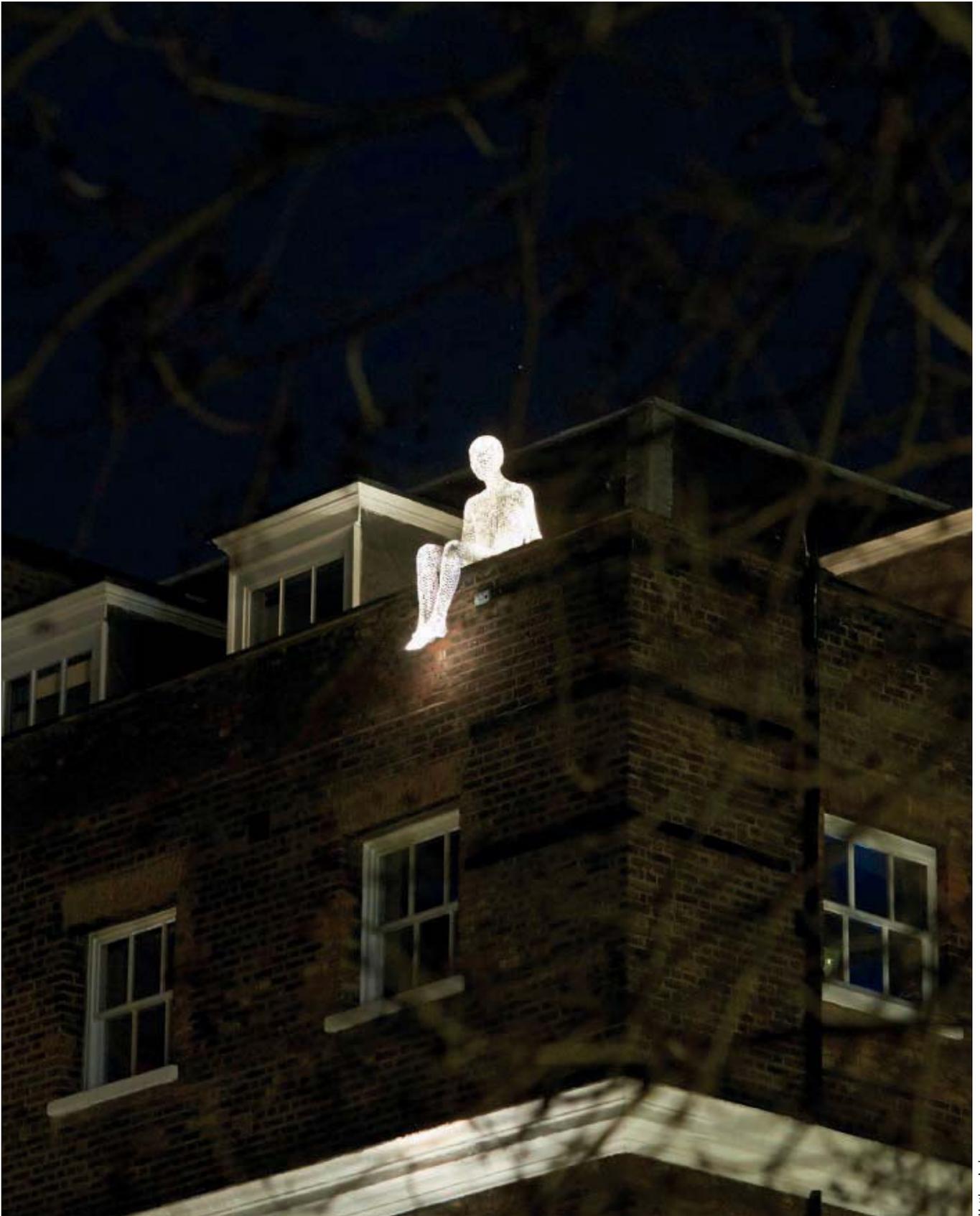
*Thoughts on Lumiere London, and  
why lighting festivals should be  
about the place and the people*



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**PICTURES:** As credited

Les Voyageurs by Cedric Le Borgne above St James's Square,  
part of Lumiere London



Matthew Andrews



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‘I do think events like these miss an opportunity to explore the way we interact with the space, and tend to use it as a backdrop’

1.8 London by Janet Echelman  
hovers over Oxford Circus

Light and lighting, unlike any other medium, present special opportunities to work with public space, integrate installations with surroundings and allow for interaction by participants. In my practice as a designer, I am a firm believer of the benefits of festivals of light and have proposed their inclusion in lighting strategies and masterplans, not only to promote tourism and regeneration but also as a cultural event for the community. I also have an interest in them as the director of a small lighting festival, LewesLight, in my home town of Lewes in East Sussex. So last January I was keen to see what Lumiere London – a new event and the largest of its kind to be held in the capital – would be like, how it sat within the context of a big city and what type of installations would be included. I was also interested to see what I could learn from the concurrent Winter Lights festival at London’s Canary Wharf.

Artichoke, the non-profit company behind Lumiere, has a track record of delivering large-scale public events including the successful and popular Lumiere festival in Durham, as well as La Machine in Liverpool in 2008, where commuters encountered a giant mechanical spider, and the Sultan’s Elephant, vaunted as ‘the biggest piece of free theatre ever seen in London’, a couple of years earlier – both quite extraordinary. As a trust working predominantly with artists aiming to present work outside of conventional venues such as theatres and galleries, it has a particular approach and has developed a formula combining spectacle with thoughtful introspection and an ethos of providing free events designed to attract thousands.

There is no doubt that Lumiere London was a huge success. It is estimated that more than a million people attended over the four nights of the event. At one point on the Saturday evening, the organisers had to use social media to advise that some installations had been turned off to reduce the volume of visitors, due to potential safety concerns.

Lumiere delivered on many levels. The quality of the works was mostly very good and some pieces were excellent. It was produced to a high standard and managed well, in a low key way. The atmosphere was relaxed and comfortable for adults and children alike. And businesses in the areas involved clearly benefited. On a purely anecdotal level, I found busy cafés, bars and restaurants whose exhausted staff claimed unprecedented numbers of customers. The Heart of London Business Alliance says footfall was 18 per cent higher than on the same weekend a year earlier.

Where the event had most impact, in terms of scale and spectacle, was in Piccadilly and Regent Street. ▶



Amanda Parer



Here the roads had been closed and large-scale works included *Les Luminéoles* by *Porté Par Le Vent*, huge fish ‘swimming’ in mid-air; *195 Piccadilly* by *NOVAK*, an enormous, fluid animation projected on to the home of BAFTA (and the previous home of the Royal Society of Watercolour Painters, which inspired the style of projection) and *Keyframes* by *Groupe LAPS* and *Thomas Veyssière*, stick figures dancing over the facade of *Liberty House*. They culminated with *1.8 London* by *Janet Echelman/Studio Echelman*, a huge suspended illuminated net above *Oxford Circus*.

All of these installations were set against the backdrop of *Studio-29* and *Tony Rimmer’s* lighting of *Regent Street’s* buildings, which created a special public space that gave the whole street the feel of a public square. Allowing a significant part of central London to be seen and enjoyed in such an unaccustomed way was a triumph in itself. But for me, these pieces worked especially well because they sat comfortably within their environment and unlike many of the other installations, which did not feel particularly site-specific, they were informed by their surroundings.

Having delivered a festival, taken part in and visited lighting events driven predominantly by architectural designers, I was struck by how different *Lumiere* and *Winter Lights* were as a result of being artist-orientated. *Lumiere* is an event, and a spectacle, that uses installations in the medium of light rather than a festival of light; the light itself and the way it modifies the space or environment is secondary to the pieces in many ways. While some of the installations were most certainly created with the locations in which they were placed very much in mind, many others were placed there based on practical considerations such as access and ambient light level, having little to do with or to say about their surroundings. My perspective is that while there is nothing wrong with this approach – and the popularity of the event shows its success – a lighting festival can deliver much more in terms of context and diversity. If anything, my experience of *Lumiere* has reinforced my own approach, which is to combine ►

Left: *Fantastic Planet* by Australian artist *Amanda Parer* at *Canary Wharf*

‘If anything, my experience of Lumiere has reinforced my own approach, which is to combine light artists’ and lighting designers’ work in such a way that they not only complement each other, but draw from narrative and context’

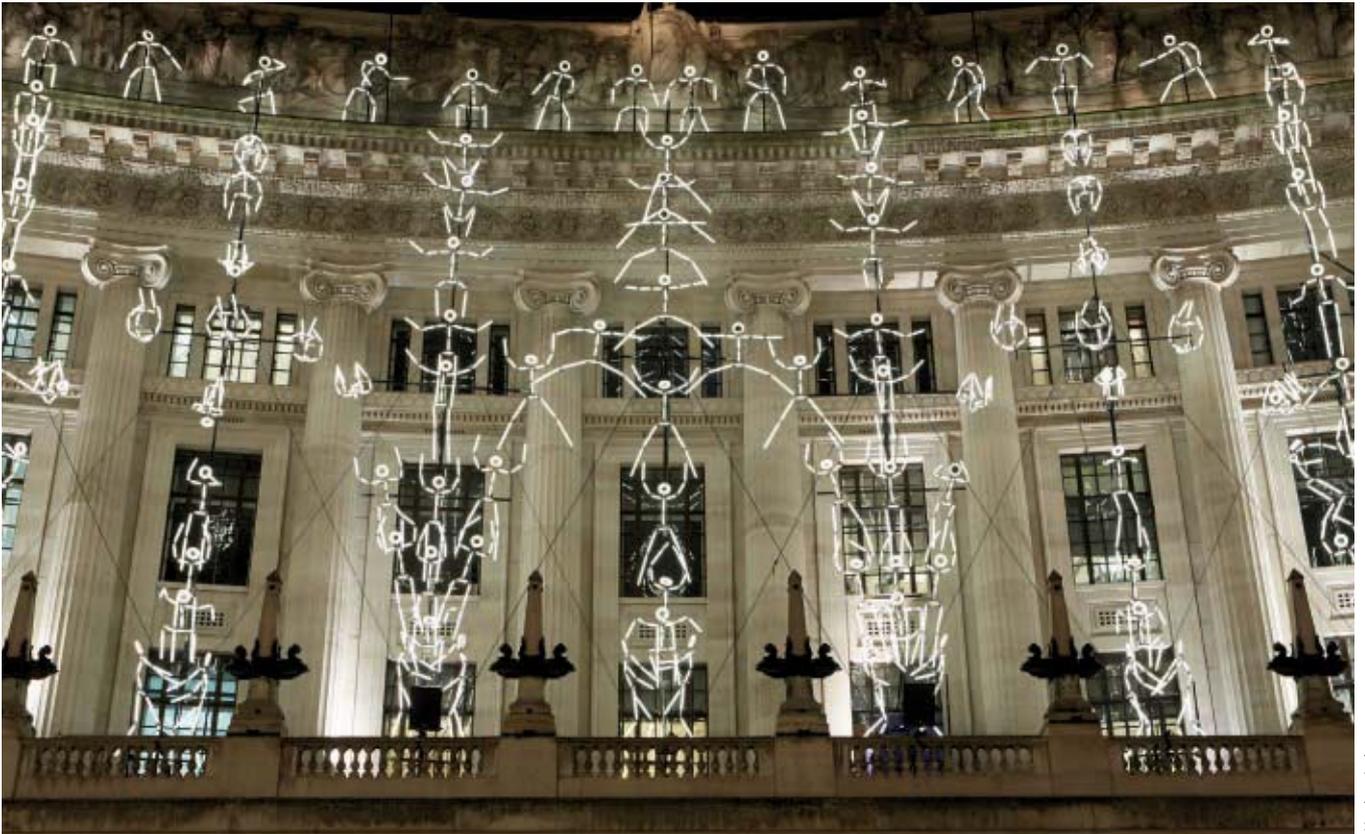
light artists and lighting designers’ work in such a way that they not only complement each other, but draw from narrative and context.

At Canary Wharf, the giant glowing figure Fantastic Planet by Amanda Parer dramatically changed our perceptions of the space it was in and the buildings around it, and challenged preconceptions of the public realm. But while I enjoyed the show at Winter Lights, I felt that a lot of the works there turned the spaces they were in into galleries, rather than responding to or being informed by their context. Although, that said, the public realm in Canary Wharf is clean and clinical, much like a large exhibition space.

It seems to me that, as lighting designers, we are interested in how people react to and behave within a space or respond to an object, structure or building, and how they are informed by any narrative or story behind them. Consequently, when we design installations they are mainly concerned with how the space or place can be modified or enhanced and how this will impact on the people who use or experience it. Many artists’ installations will be more self-contained, focused on the piece and what it is saying. Neither approach is right or wrong, but applied together they are potentially of great power.

An important element of this type of event is surprise. This works on two levels: one is pure spectacle, something Lumiere London had in spades, the other is more subtle and understated, where you may turn a corner and find yourself in an altogether unexpected environment. This relies on intimacy, something that was difficult for Lumiere London to achieve, especially given its success. It is hard to achieve intimacy in a space shared with many hundreds of people, but imagine how different it might have been if Leicester Square (Garden of Light by French Collective TILT) had been experienced by only a few at a time. Some ▶

Top: Keyframes by Groupe LAPS/  
Thomas Veyssi re. Right: Les  
Lumin oles by Port  Par Le Vent  
‘swimming’ above Piccadilly



Matthew Andrews



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Grainige Photography



‘Pieces worked especially well because they sat comfortably within their environment’

installations did indeed manage to convey calm and serenity despite the crowds, in particular the ethereal illuminated sculptures *Les Voyageurs (The Travellers)* by Cédric Le Borgne, and NOVAK’s 195 Piccadilly that was so immersive that if you allowed it, you became almost unaware of those around you. *Winter Lights* operated on a smaller scale; installations such as *On the Wings of Freedom*, the swarm of LED butterflies by Aether and Hemera, relied greatly on the calmness of the space around it.

It was good to experience the enjoyment of the many thousands who came to look, but I do think events like these miss an opportunity to explore the way we interact with the space, and tend to use it as a backdrop rather than develop the more complex relationship there could be between the installations, the place and the people. Lighting interventions of even the smallest scale, in the right context, can deliver a big impact and, above all, light and lighting can change and modify a space and how people feel within it, making it accessible to everyone, regardless of their interest in art or the process or concepts behind it. □

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● *Graham Festenstein, MILP, IALD is an independent architectural lighting designer and director of the LewesLight festival*

Left: *Litre of Light* used plastic bottles as lamps and was a collaboration between artist Mick Stephenson, Central St Martin’s students and MyShelter Foundation