

When Skyscrapers Are Your Screen

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THERE is a commercial building at the intersection of Canal Street and West Broadway with a whitewashed and windowless side that most people would consider an eyesore. But for J R Skola on a recent evening it was a six-story canvas for a traveling work called “Space Monkey.”

Mr. Skola, a founder of the Dawn of Man art collective, used a laptop, a portable generator and a projector strapped to the roof of his car to cast on the building an enormous video of a dancing monkey (really a five-minute loop of a friend in a costume). While the creature flapped its arms and kicked its feet, people stopped on the crowded street to gawk and snap photos. “When we project this in the Lower East Side,” Mr. Skola said, “drunk people try to dance like the monkey.”

Mr. Skola and his creative partner Max Nova create guerrilla projections; that is, works that are shown in public without any of the necessary approvals. They are part of a “video mapping” art scene that is bubbling up in New York, London and other urban centers. While video projection art is not new, it has become much more ambitious thanks to recent advancements in 3-D-projection mapping, a technology that helps create the illusion of multidimensional movement across or around the contours of any surface, regardless of its shape. And cheaper versions of video mapping software are now on the market, opening up the medium to a wider array of artists. A departure from box-office fare like “Avatar,” these projections require no special glasses to perceive them in three dimensions; popular online clips, like one of [hands playing a building like it's a piano](#), by Urbanscreen, a company in Germany, demonstrate the seductive power of this medium.

“This is a new world where artists can show their work in any location,” Dave Haroldsen, a creative director for a global tech-arts festival called the Creators Project, said. “It’s brilliant and shocking and new, and it really speaks to youth,” said Mr. Haroldsen, who represents Intel, one of the sponsors of the movable festival.

One of the most prominent festivals dedicated to the art form is the long-running “Fête des Lumières in Lyon. The tradition there of placing candles in household windows in honor of the Virgin Mary stretches back more than 150 years, and the modern incarnation of the festival began incorporating 3-D-mapping techniques in recent years. On Dec. 8, the opening day of the festival, the installation “Urban Flipper” turned the facade of an old theater that once played host to Sarah Bernhardt into the world’s largest interactive pinball machine, adorned with clownlike touches that resembled a large white mustache and six orange eyebrows. Balls ricocheted around the facade, bouncing off whiskers and colliding with eyebrows, accompanied by a barrage of video-arcade noises and exhilarating light effects.

In the United States experimental video projection festivals have begun popping up on both coasts and in between. Ethan Vogt, producer of the Bring to Light: Nuit Blanche New York festival in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, says that this medium can play a critical role in the evolution of public art: “It is too important to exist in just a guerrilla way.”

Matthew Clark, a founder of the London collective United Visual Artists, said that what excites him the most about video mapping technology is that it enables him to break away from the traditional flat rectangle that most people associate with film. “It’s quite liberating,” Mr. Clark said. “Suddenly anything can be your canvas.” (His team also works with motion-activated sculpture, like the interactive light-and-sound cube that responds to human presence installed at the Coachella Valley Music and Art Festival last year. It later traveled to New York during a Creators Project event in October). The 2012 Olympic Delivery Authority has commissioned United Visual Artists to join in designing a “stadium” to be made solely of fabric and light.

Some video mapping art has an activist tinge. In November Mark Read, an artist and activist, organized the Occupy Wall Street projection, nicknamed the “Bat Signal,” and recruited Mr. Nova and Mr. Skola for their large-scale projection savvy. Mr. Read said he is now helping to create a sort of “Batmobile” with projection capabilities that will visually spread the word that the Occupy movement is still alive. “It’s like Commissioner Gordon sending out a call for aid and a call to arms,” he said.

Along similar lines, about six years ago the new-media artist Evan Roth helped pioneer the use of a digital laser pen and a video projector to write graffiti in public spaces, much as a traditional graffiti artist would use a spray can. Art collectives in cities like Berlin and Belo Horizonte, Brazil, now use Mr. Roth’s methods to tag buildings, bridges and schoolyards. “It’s the kind of activism that isn’t just making a sign,” said Mr. Roth, 33. “And it’s something people my age might be interested in taking part of irregardless of the politics.” But despite the potential subversive thrill, this graffiti lasts only as long as the projector is on, which is why video sites like YouTube are vital in preserving it.

The tools of 3-D projection mapping have also infiltrated another arena: music. Artists like the rapper Drake and the electronic musicians Skrillex and Amon Tobin recently toured the United States with mind-boggling stagecraft that employed video mapping. Mr. Tobin's recent "ISAM" tour, for instance, featured a giant cube structure upon which he projected imagery reminiscent of sci-fi classics like "Blade Runner" and "Star Wars."

"Everyone's first experience with technology is Princess Leia appearing as a hologram," he said. "We wanted to tweak all of the proper nerd cues."

In what could be a major development for digital mapping in the United States, the New York City Economic Development Corporation is soliciting bids for a large-scale "interactive lighting initiative" in Lower Manhattan for late 2012, with \$1 million in support. "We want to create a new attraction for Lower Manhattan that will draw people downtown, so that they can appreciate the incredible transformations occurring there," said Seth Pinsky, president of the Economic Development Corporation. "It's a relatively cost-effective way of reaching a large audience."

Aware of the impact of this medium, many corporate customers are using elements of 3-D-projection mapping in their marketing campaigns. In November the electronic-music artist Deadmau5 collaborated with Nokia on a live mapping event in London, with the city's Millbank Tower as its rippling and gyrating canvas. Some video-mapping artists look askance at such commercialism. "At the end of the show, when the building turned into a giant Nokia phone, everyone booed," Mr. Clark said with apparent glee.

But Mr. Nova, who in addition to his guerrilla creations works on projects for clients like the Museum of Modern Art and Heinz Ketchup, seems comfortable on both sides of the art versus commerce divide.

And back on Canal Street a car pulled over to take a closer look at the gyrating Space Monkey. The driver rolled down his window. "Hey!" he yelled. "Is this a commercial or is this art?"