

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Imagine if we could control the billboards

by Shawn Micallef

Apart from walking down the street and choosing which direction to go, we have little direct control over what happens in the public spaces we inhabit. We can lobby City Hall if we want something changed but the results are not immediate. Action and response are generally separated. A recent art installation at the Drake Hotel during the McLuhan Festival of the Future aimed to change that, and give us some agency — and an immediate influence — in our public space.

P2P, or Power to the People, is an interactive billboard constructed with 125 incandescent light bulbs hung in neat rows forming a rectangle. Nearby, 125 corresponding switches are built into a large control panel that is placed within view of the bulbs. Each switch controls one bulb, allowing people to turn on individual lights and literally design their own billboard. Passersby can spell out short words or make basic visual designs, reminiscent of primitive ASCII computer “drawings” from the early 1990s.

P2P was first exhibited in 2002 outside Kitchener's City Hall, and in October of

2004 the piece was installed on the second story of the Drake Hotel, along the front of their rooftop patio. The control panel was on the other side of Queen, in a parking lot adjacent to the sidewalk. The switches and bulbs communicated across Queen Street using wireless technology.

Though there are somewhat high-tech components behind the scenes, P2P's aesthetic is retrograde, using bare bulbs and light switches, items that have been in common use for nearly 100 years. We immediately know to flick a switch, and can see the results of that action instantly.

Creators Matt Gorbet, Rob Gorbet and Susan Gorbet found that the messages people left in the more formal civic public space in Kitchener differed from those left on Queen Street. “On Kitchener City Hall [the messages] were more in-your-face,” recalls Susan. “There was more attitude; they were more for getting back at someone; they were more inflammatory, while [at the Drake] there was more of a sense of wit...to make a mark on the environment in a more thoughtful way.”

Throughout the 32 days the piece was installed on Queen West, words like “LAME” or “EGO” could be seen, complete with an arrow pointing down at the poor folks waiting to get into the Drake lounge. Participants were responding to the environment around the piece, not just writing random words. It's somewhat surprising that the control panel — which sat unguarded in public, 24 hours a day — was

not vandalized. Toronto is a nice place, but there is always somebody willing to break things. Yet, Susan explains, it needed little protection. “We wondered if people would try and take it apart, but people claimed it and were protective of it.” In fact, she explains, a man living in a van on the side street across from the Drake became an unofficial security guard, promising he would take care of the installation.

Apart from being fun, P2P's community acceptance and unscathed run at the Drake demonstrates that residents are quite willing to engage in public discourse and leave their mark if given the chance and the tools. “As soon as a space acknowledges you, or empowers you, you start thinking you're a member of that space and you're protective of it,” says Matt. “People took a certain amount of pride in initiating others to the piece.”

P2P is part of an emerging genre of interactive public art. In 2001-2002, a project called Blinkenlights was set up in an office building on Berlin's Alexanderplatz. They placed 144 computer-controlled lamps behind the office windows, allowing Berliners to control the designs and words that appeared. People could even use their mobile phones to play a 20-storey game of Pong on the side of the building.

Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael

Lozano-Hemmer has also created interactive artworks on a massive scale. In 2000, he installed “Vector Elevation” in Mexico City's Zócalo Square, consisting of 18 robotic searchlights located around the edges of the expansive public space. People could use an online 3D interface to design a pattern, and at a scheduled time, their design would be rendered live in the square, visible for 15 kilometres. Over 800,000 people participated in this project alone.

What all these projects have in common is the “inclusion of people as mediators of the pieces, not just observers,” explains Susan. “Spotlights don't mean anything unless somebody is making them move.” Though P2P is a temporary art project, it would be great if this sort of inclusive experience could become a permanent part of our city. Dundas Square doesn't much feel like it belongs to us, and with all those non-local ads surrounding it the space could be Anywhere — there's nothing particularly Torontonion about it. Since we have no control over what surrounds that space, installing some P2P-style interactivity in that environment might make us feel a little more at home in one of our city's most important public spaces. ↑

photo courtesy of Gorbet Design Inc.

