Marcus Neustetter: Collaboration via Technology and Light

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As a socially engaged South African artist, Marcus Neustetter finds himself in the midst of changing relationships between racially and socio-economically diverse members of his own society, as well as with other African countries and the world as a whole. As he explores issues surrounding his society and these changes, Neustetter often creates works that involve shared experience. Themes within these works include collaboration, light, and technology. As Neustetter uses these themes to explore and create shared experiences, his works often become agents of social advocacy, bringing people together to engage key issues in a society otherwise prone to fragmentation. This paper will consider how light and technology enhance and enable collaboration in Neustetter's work. The cosmos often combines light and technology into a shared human experience, explaining its frequent presence in Neustetter's works. Analyzing collaborative exercises and experiments with light-producing items (*Vredefort Interventions Series*, Emory University light experiments, *Chasing Light)* shows the importance of creativity and curiosity in collaboration. The same type of curiosity-driven innovation is applied to technology in works like *digital frottage*. Technology creates new and different opportunities for collaboration. Thus, it can be used in innovative ways in works like SEARCH and *UrbaNET—Hillbrow/Dakar/Hillbrow* to advocate for equal access for marginalized groups and show the power of inclusion.

The *Vredefort Interventions Series* includes photographs that Neustetter made in collaboration with participants from the Space School Africa. Participants played and experimented with "glow sticks, rope light[s], LED lights, and laser pointers."[1] While in the Vredefort meteorite impact crater, they created representations of phenomena related to outer space, like "nebulae, space orbits, [and] moments of meteorite impact."[2] Therefore, space is

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[1] Marcus Neustetter, "Chasing Light," in *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer (New York: Monacelli Press, 2012), 329.

important to this work because it offers a link to the subject. The work enhances the participants'

understanding of the space and connects the space to broader forces at work in the universe,

including the meteorite impact that made this space so distinctive. Thus, these connections give

the work added impact, especially for the participants, because it joins a tangible place to more

distant forces through an active experience. In this instance, light improves the quality of

collaboration, not only by allowing participants to see each other and understand their

relationships in space but also as a tool that encourages play and, thus, interaction.

   In one photograph created as a part of this series (figure 1), there are four large circles,

each of which has sets of increasingly smaller rings inside. These rings glow against the black

background, while human participants and smaller dashes of light are also visible, but less

prominent. Some of the sets of rings overlap, emphasizing their interconnectedness, providing an

important reminder of the ways that people connect through collaboration. Motion is also

evident, suggesting the dynamism of the universe. Repetition of the rings adds balance to the

image. These rings of light measure, define, and fill the space they create. By being the subject

and main focus of the work, the rings create their own space out of the vast black beyond. Thus,

light offers a way for people to find each other and create something specific together, within the

larger world as a whole.

   Neustetter undertook a similar project at Emory University during March 2015. A group

of assorted participants, which was mostly comprised of university students but also included

various adults and children from the community, experimented with different types of lights. The

evening began when Neustetter swept, threw, and otherwise manipulated nine thousand glow

sticks. Afterwards, attendees experimented with the glow sticks themselves, in addition to

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[2] Ibid.

shadow puppets and fairy lights. Neustetter also guided the group through activities with light up

balls and with laser pointers. When experimenting, participants observed each other and

incorporated each other's ideas into their play. For instance, after one group began using a sheet

to toss large amounts of glow sticks at once, other groups followed suit. Accordingly,

experimentation takes on a broader scope when done in a group rather than alone. Shared

experience encourages innovation and discourse.

However, some participants at Emory, mainly students, did not always follow

Neustetter's directions very well, taking a long time to transition between activities or needing to

be asked several times to turn off certain types of lights that were not currently in use. Their

behavior highlights the loss of control that naturally occurs with collaboration, but also the

broader possibilities that accompany a personal loss of control. Perhaps this difficulty in

following directions occurred because participants could not immediately see the results of their

movements and experiments. Participating in the Light Experiments requires a certain amount of

faith and buy-in to a group mentality. In a world that is becoming more accustomed to immediate

results, the lag time between a human activity and the technological response (sharing on social

media) might render participants inpatient. Yet, in the Light Experiments, the photographs

shared on social media are a form of documentation, not the actual act of experimenting itself.

Thus, being engaged and in the moment with other people, without the immediate aid of social

media, is important to the success of the Light Experiments as constructed at Emory University.

Thus, the Light Experiments reflect Neustetter's search for a balance of human and technological

connections.

Participants and attendees were encouraged to share their own photographs (figures 2-7)

and videos of the event on social media using special hash tags to enable others to easily find

them. Photography itself can be considered a capturing of light, which participants are then sharing with others. The use of social media takes the idea of shared experience into a broader scope by deepening connections between those who were at the event and also including those who did not attend. Those who participated in the light experiments could gain more insight by examining the ideas and experiences of others. Because social media has a nearly unlimited capacity for sharing, as items are commented upon or reposted, an increasingly large number of people share in the experience in some way.

Yet, each individual's experience is inherently different. Each person brings their own past associations from throughout their life to their interpretation of the work. In addition, participating at the event and viewing photographs from the event are very different experiences. Participating at the event is an active way of experiencing the work. It results in deep insights about process, like the importance of collaboration to creating works of this variety on such a large scale. Viewing the photographs reveals broader perspectives, rather than only one person's experience. They also isolate moments out of a frenzy of activity and create opportunities to focus on one specific visual phenomenon.

There are similarities between the work at Emory and the *Vredefort Interventions Series*. These similarities include the use of similar media and an emphasis on play and experimentation. Thus, people in different parts of the world underwent similar experiences. The fact that this experience was meaningful in different countries and cultures shows that the skills and activities involved in it are universal to many people. Light and play communicate across boundaries including language and age. Participants in both events, if knowing of the other's existence, might realize new connections and, through them, empathy, with those in another part of the world.

Light plays an important role visually in these participatory, experimental works by emphasizing repeated forms and documenting motion. Light also provides an important connection to the cosmos, since humans see stars because of the light they give off. In addition, light evokes other cosmic phenomena, like meteorites and the aurora borealis, especially when coupled with motion, as in these images (figures 1-7). Light can be seen an experienced by multiple people at once, so it is a shared experience. Documenting light in a photograph allows it to be shared by not only those who saw it in person, but also those who see the photograph. Thus, light becomes a way to communicate with others, sharing experiences and knowledge.

Light also evokes technology, when one recalls electricity or perhaps the glow of a screen. The experimentation and manipulation of items like glow sticks and fairy lights takes on technological characteristics because participants innovate by using the items in multiple ways to accomplish various goals and create diverse imagery. Not only do the manipulated objects become technology themselves, but the process also reveals a type of thinking and problem solving that is useful in the creation and application of technology to solve problems.

Neustetter uses this type of problem-solving thinking in *Chasing Light* (figure 8), when he explores how technology can be used to view, experience, and understand a phenomenon one has not personally seen. This work is a digital work that uses bright, engaging green flashes and flickers, as well as lively rain and static sounds, to create a multisensory experience of the Northern Lights. Flashes of electric green move and flicker sporadically against a dark background, which makes the lights stand out as bolder and more brilliant. The light moves around the wall, emerging and disappearing without a pattern. It bounces in a way that reminds one of the sounds of the piece, while not being synchronized with them. The light's speed, boldness, and shape vary throughout the duration of the work. These variations create a

mesmerizing effect by engaging the viewers and then keeping their focus. This effect is magnified since there is usually only one light on the screen at a time, so the viewer does not become distracted. At one point, the green light grows large, filling most of the screen with a slow curve before totally disappearing. The smoothness of this light on the screen contrasts the rough texture of the sounds, which resemble buzzing, static, rain, electric interference, and soft chirping. Yet, the sounds ultimately unify the work by suggesting a motion and liveliness similar to that of the dynamic light.

In a TED talk, Neustetter describes the original source of his desire to see the Northern Lights. While working with the Space School Africa students, participants threw glow sticks up into the air. Experiencing this unique combination of color, light, and motion inspired Neustetter to want to view the Northen Lights themselves in person.[3] This source of inspiration reveals the interconnectedness between Neustetter's projects. Neustetter traveled to Norway to view the Northern Lights, but was unable to see them because of overcast weather. However, he was able to work with James Webb, another artist who was traveling with him, made the sound for the work by recording the electromagnetic waves of the Northern Lights with a high frequency recorder. Later, Neustetter played these sounds through a speaker with a tray of water on top, into which he shined a laser.[4] Thus, this work is one that takes an experimental approach to technology, using it as a tool to solve a problem by recreating a hard-to-access phenomenon. The approach parallels the ways that technology, like computers, can provide access to a wide variety of information for those who might not normally be able to access it as easily. This parallel provides a connection between Neustetter's personal influences and his advocacy and

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[3] *TEDxJohannesburg - Marcus Neustetter - 11/15/09*, 2010.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOuanZljhCk&feature=youtube_gdata_player.
[4] Neustetter, "Chasing Light," 333-335.

community building work. In *Chasing Light,* Neustetter uses technology in a collaborative way. Collaboration is a fitting method for depicting the cosmos because it is something experienced by many simultaneously.

Chasing Light allows both Neustetter and the viewers of his work to experience a version of a phenomenon that is ordinarily limited by geography and other constraints. This can be compared to the use of social media to allow those not present at the light experiments at Emory University to experience the event. Both experiencing the Northern Lights through *Chasing Light* and experiencing the light experiments through social media provide a different sort of experience than one would receive in person. While these experiences could be considered more distant, they might also provide more space for objective analysis. Additionally, this secondary type of experience can be spread more broadly, thereby including more people. For example, people who are not able to travel to see the Northern Lights and do not live in a region where they are visible could experience them through *Chasing Light*. Through the experience of viewing the work of art, they would gain a deeper understanding of this cosmic phenomenon and their relationship to it. Thus, using technology to document, recreate, and share experiences includes and enriches a broader audience. Technology has the power not only to disseminate information, but also to use this information as a tool to unite people.

These recreations of experiences via technology resonate with the ideas of philosopher Jean Baudrillard. He identifies the real as "that for which it is possible to provide an equivalent representation."[5] Further, Baudrillard explains that things that are "always already reproduced" are "hyperreal."[6] Posts on social media can be continuously shared and reposted. *Chasing Light*

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[5] Jean Baudrillard, "The Hyper-realism of Simulation," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1019.

can be played on a continuous loop and shown in a variety of places and times. For that reason, Neustetter's work can be considered hyperreal in its ability to broadly disseminated over and over again. Yet, these shared projects are recreations of real things, not the things themselves. *Chasing Light* is a recreation of the Northern Lights, not the actual aurora borealis. Although the frequency of the recording matches the electro-magnetic waves of the Northern Lights, the work can be reproduced many times and in many places. This work also captures only a moment of the Northen Lights, rather than their constant change. This work remains the same when played multiple times, while the Northern Lights themselves would always appear at least slightly differently. This capacity for reproduction and the limits of its representation mark *Chasing Light* as hyperreal. The photographs and videos of the Emory University light experiments shared on social media are depictions of the event, which do not provide the complete multi-sensory experience of attending the event. Thus, these processes are simulations. Baudrillard supports this by identifying hyperrealism as an entity that "functions entirely within the realm of simulation."[7] Viewing Neustetter's works as hyperreal reveals the nature of the types of shared experiences created through it. Sharing via technology does not create the same kind of interactions as experiencing something together in person, but it provides an equally real variety of shared interaction.

Neustetter's works can create meaningful dialogue with other contemporary works that engage technology and light. *Deep Survey* (figure 9), created by an international group of artists including Miguel A. Aragón-Calvo (video animation), Nick Scoville and COSMOS science team (data), and Karel Nel (sound track), is a video work that involves an in-motion view of stars and galaxies within a two-degree frame of the universe.[8] It uses motion and light to mesmerize

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.

viewers, in a similar way to *Chasing Light*. *Deep Survey* is accompanied by sound which, like the sound in *Chasing Light*, complements the visual elements without mimicking them exactly, creating a multifaceted sensory experience. Both works are also based on actual scientific data. These works begin with facts and transform them into something reproduced and more than real. The art simulates reality, but also incorporates personal experience since the artists connect technology to their passions and desires. In addition, *Deep Survey*, like *Chasing Light,* is collaborative. *Deep Survey* is the work of both scientists and artists from Mexico, the United States, and South Africa[9]. Both of these works use light to create images and enable collaboration, reinforcing the idea that the cosmos is a shared experience.

Both *Deep Survey* and *Chasing Light* were included in the *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts* exhibition at the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University.[10] Viewing these works in dialogue with other works from a wide range periods and places within Africa reveals both how they follow previous trends and how they distinctively mark the period in which they were made. Many of the other works in the exhibition engaged or implied light, often through considering the stars or the sun. Yet, both *Deep Survey* and *Chasing Light* reflect an increasingly connected contemporary world. The use of innovative technology highlights the ever-growing connections between creativity and science. The collaboration enabled by this technology is a product of multi-national relationships. So, the technological and the human become increasingly intertwined.

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[8] Karel Nel, "The Cosmos and Africa: Balancing Data and the Poetics of Knowledge," in *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*, ed. Christine Mullen Kreamer (New York: Monacelli Press, 2012), 359-360.

[9] Ibid.

[10] *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*, Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University, Atlanta, January 31-June 21, 2015.

In the same way that *Deep Survey* and *Chasing Light* combine light and sound to enable collaboration, Neustetter also combined sound and light in a collaboration with jazz musicians during his visit to Emory University. While the musicians played, incorporating African instruments, Neustetter drew under a microscope and his drawings were projected for the audience to see.[11] Through the use of the microscope and projection (examples of light and technology), Neustetter creates a dialogue both between himself and the musicians and between himself and the audience. Thus, he connects a variety of people through this shared experience. These connections occur across media, making the experience a multi-sensory one and adding an element of humanity where technology could be flat and less varied. In addition, this experience is temporal. The people present could only have the full experience of this performance once in this same particular way. This further joins individuals through shared experience.

Reproduction, key to *Deep Survey* and *Chasing Light,* is also essential to Neustetter's process in *digital frottage* (figure 10). In this work, Neustetter scanned images including "animations and abstract icons" from the screen of his laptop computer.[12] Using technology, in this case a scanner and a laptop computer, Neustetter is able to engage with images in multiple formats. These layers of reproduction, suggesting hyperreality, align with the idea suggested by the work's title because frottage is traditionally a process involving making a rubbing of a surface. In another step of his process, "he used his laptop as an enlarger in the darkroom placing photo emulsion paper straight onto the screen."[13] Accordingly, technology becomes a light source, allowing for further reproduction. Using technology and light in these ways provides an

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[11] Amanda Hellman, Response to Presentation, Modern and Contemporary African Art (Agnes Scott College), 21 April 2015.
[12] Marcus Neustetter and Nathaniel Stern, "Physically Digital, Digitally Physical," *Leonardo* 38, no. 3 (June 2005): 181–181, doi:10.1162/0024094054028967.
[13] Ibid.

opportunity for Neustetter to engage with South African artist Nathaniel Stern, who is concerned about the same issues of human connections in a digital world. For instance, Neustetter and Stern combine their ideas and processes in exhibitions and a website of *The GetAway Experiments*.[14] Creating a website further broadens the scope of the shared experience they create by including viewers beyond the limits of geography.

While some technology can be derived from experimentation with readily available items, products like computers and cell phones, or their absence, increasingly define the characteristics of societies and the disparities between them. For that reason, it is especially relevant for groups and nations in flux. In his essay "Search," Neustetter explains that "South Africa's position as a gateway to many destinations within Africa has afforded it a strong position in terms of a melting pot of not only the local diverse cultures and communities but an influx of communities from most African states."[15] He further explains that while technology could be an important tool for those who are oppressed or undervalued, it is not equally utilized or equally accessible.[16] Thus, projects like the *Vredefort Interventions Series*, which encourages innovative thinking in a group setting, become a tool of advocacy and community building by addressing crucial issues in a non-threatening, playful environment. Differences in race, class, and access to technology become momentarily less significant when individuals work together for a common goal. When communities are strengthened through activities in this manner, they become more deeply united and, thus, better able to advocate successfully for themselves.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Marcus Neustetter, "Search," in *Unplugged: Art as the Scene of Global Conflicts = Kunst Als Schauplatz Globaler Konflikte*, ed., Gerfried Stocker, Christine Schöpf, Ars Electronica Center Linz, and Ars Electronica (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 386.

[16] Ibid.

The work of The Trinity Session, a collective that Neustetter manages, is in line with these processes and goals. Their SEARCH project "aims to expose certain processes developing in South Africa that are contributing to appropriating a global language in digital cultural practice such as responsive communication, design and subversive strategies."[17] This project involves research, workshops, and collaboration with guests. This format parallels that of Neustetter's other works involving experimentation and collaboration. Thus, this model is an especially effective one for engaging issues of technology in South Africa today. Technology is important to collaboration not only in the ways it connects people, but in that advocacy for improved access to it can unite communities.

Maps are a form of technology, in that they are tools that can be used to accomplish a goal. Neustetter used maps both as a navigational technology and a tool to build community connections in the *UrbaNET—Hillbrow/Dakar/Hillbrow* project that he undertook with Stephen Hobbs. Hobbs and Neustetter engaged with Senegalese immigrants who live in an impoverished neighborhood, considered unsafe to enter by many, in Johannesburg. The artists asked the immigrants to create maps of Dakar.[18] The artists then used these maps to find their way around Dak'Art, which Storm Janse Van Rensburg finds inherently difficult to navigate, regardless of the method used.[19] Upon their return to South Africa, Neustetter and Hobbs engaged with the Senegalese immigrants again, sharing images, messages, and insights from their experience in Dakar.[20] Thus, the creative use of maps enabled meaningful connections with a marginalized

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[17] Ibid., 388.
[18] Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (New York, N.Y.; Cambridge, Mass.; London: Creative Time ; MIT Press, 2012), 171.
[19] Storm Janse Van Rensburg, "Art Routes: Negotiating Dak'art," *African Arts* 39, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 66.
[20] Thompson, 171.

group. Technology is a powerful tool especially when it is used to unite the experiences of diverse individuals for a common goal.

Neustetter's use of art as a tool for social change is aligned with Karen Frostig's understanding of art activism as something that is "characteristically relational" and "engages community participation."[21] For instance, the SEARCH project involved "Web designers and programmers, digital composers, critical commentators and theorists on digital culture in South Africa and contemporary Net and popular culture activists."[22] This broad range of perspectives makes for a more varied and effective activism than one person could accomplish alone. Frostig also states that, in art activism, "Listening is paired with action."[23]
UrbaNET—Hillbrow/Dakar/Hillbrow uses this principle in that Neustetter and Hobbs listened to the Senegalese immigrants and then acted based on their maps. This experience would not have existed if Neustetter and Hobbs did not listen to the immigrants and an opportunity for gained trust and community building would have been lost.

In Neustetter's art, light and technology sometimes act independently, but often act together. They become agents of collaboration through methods like promoting play and encouraging shared human experiences. It is these forms of collaboration that give Neustetter's works the power to cause significant social impact, such as the inclusion of marginalized groups via technology. Works that can be individually experienced, but also shared broadly allow for engagement that is both personal and far-reaching.

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[22] Neustetter, "Search," 388.
[23] Frostig, 50.

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