

SPLASH: REAL OR VIRTUAL?

Olga Subirós, Todd Palmer

Creative partners: PROGRAM COLLECTIVE (Barcelona/Chicago/London/Paris)

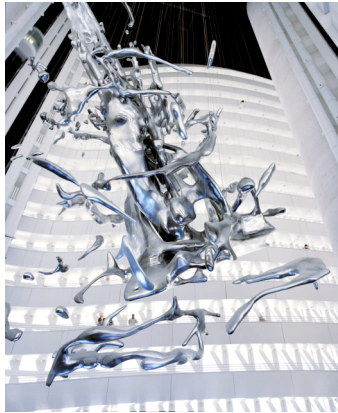


Figure 1. *SPLASH* installation view at World Expo 2008.

In this presentation two of the four creatives who comprise PROGRAM COLLECTIVE (Mona Kim, Todd Palmer, Simon Taylor, Olga Subirós) discuss how the multi-media installations of SPLASH and WATER FOR LIFE uniquely challenged conceptual and practical “gaps” between the computer-digital realm and experiences in real time and space.

The first part of the talk (roughly five minutes) addresses the challenges presented by the client who commissioned the work (the World Expo authority in Spain, Expoagua Zaragoza 2008) and by the site for which these works were commissioned. The project was set within a 20-story atrium at the core of a new skyscraper which was to be an icon of the Expo and the region’s tallest building. The presentation illustrates how the collective arrived at this concept of a sculptural rendition of a digitally-defined droplet SPLASH, augmented by an ambient audio-visual experience entitled “Water for Life.”

At the conceptual stage, the synthesis of object and a time-based experience involving moving images, ambient sound and the movement of the audience through space below, around and above the artwork, addressed the narrative expectations of the Expo event. It was a three-month global gathering intended to both celebrate an essential natural resource and also to focus public attention on the importance of sustainability, in a unique and inspiring way. The SPLASH concept embraced these ideas, while also introducing the possibility of a virtual and real experience.

The second part of the talk (about ten minutes) looks at the “making of” SPLASH. Realizing the concept pushed computer graphics that simulate and give visual form to complex natural phenomena (in this case the intricate motion of fluids impacted by gravity, wind and other forces) into a real-world setting. The presentation illustrates some of the unique challenges that emerged in translating the virtually-derived form simulating a micro-scale moment into a 74-foot tall sculptural form made of 134 discrete objects suspended from cables in a monumental (131-foot tall) public space, experienced in real-time and by an audience in motion.

The presentation will briefly survey the key tools and collaborative teamwork that were involved -- from software and structural engineering expertise, to new modes of digital fabrication. These were conjoined with traditional techniques like polishing and smoothing by the human hand. The presentation will illustrate the technical innovations and creative solutions required to synthesize a variety of software platforms and processes.

During the presentation’s concluding section (approximately five minutes) the artists discuss how the concept of merging real and virtual modes engaged the audience’s experience of the work in a public space, as well as ways in which the experience resonated in virtual realms including chat forums, video blogs and social media. A particular irony is that this representation of an ephemeral moment— a SPLASH—was intended to be a temporary installation for a three month Expo. But the impact was such that on-line groups have rallied to preserve or revive the SPLASH as a permanent public artwork.

The presentation muses on the possibilities of intermingling of virtual and real experience as they resonate with the theme of sustainability which the commission was intended to represent, and also as a potential avenue for further exploration in future art and design projects.