

## Soft, Sexy, Fantastic. Inflating public space

Daniel Felgendreher  
[hello@danielfelgendreher.eu](mailto:hello@danielfelgendreher.eu)

### Abstract

Plastique Fantastique has been operating as a platform for temporary architecture at the interface between art, architecture and urban practice since its founding 1999 in Berlin. Influenced by the unique cultural and spatial conditions that made Berlin a laboratory for testing new ways of acting in public space at the time, the studio has specialised in creating immersive, pneumatic installations made of plastic film as mutant, low energy architectures for ephemeral activities. With their temporary urban interventions they intend to involve citizens in creative processes provoking them to activate, and enjoy public space.

**Keywords:** temporary architecture, pneumatic sculpture, ephemeral installation, art in public space, local participation

### To cite this article:

Felgendreher, D. (2018). Soft, Sexy, Fantastic. Inflating public space. *The Journal of Public Space*, 3(2), 41-74, DOI 10.32891/jps.v3i2.1109

This article has been accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the journal website for further information.



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## **Friction**

Squeezing between buildings, squashing under bridges, entwining around lampposts or trees: a key quality of their work are the various modalities of physical contact the spatial installations get into with the existing built environment. The pneumatic structures of *Plastique Fantastique* sometimes enter into a gentle, sometimes into a more provocative dialogue with their context. During the Helsinki Design Week 2016 for instance they wrapped a space around the Three Smiths Statue on the eponymous square in the Finnish capital. People came for concerts, talks or just to meet each other at the foot of the statue. The friction that the elastic, airy volumes produce with the rigid, static built structures of the city is not only of a physical kind – the plastic rubs against the brick wall of a building – but also of a programmatic one: the interventions disrupt the everyday use (or non-use) of certain public spaces in a way that they provoke a new reading of, and a new reaction to them. The former produces a straightforward image of the latter, which allows for an immediate visual communication of the interests and *modi operandi* of their work. As well as of their approach to public space.

The inhabitants of Copenhagen could witness this double friction in Summer 2013 when the studio developed a one hundred square meter single-layer pneumatic structure that was installed in thirteen different public spaces of the city as part of *Metropolis - Festival and Laboratory for Art and Performance in Urban Space*. Traveling around from location to location the inflatable space was squeezed under trees close to a lake in Vanløse, between climbing walls on a playground in Nørrebro or around the iconic objects on Superkilen park. It constantly adapted its shape in relation to specific elements of the sites. At the same time the intervention introduced certain bewildering activities that momentarily changed the character of the public spaces chosen. People were invited to a silent disco at one of the noisiest intersections in the city, to do astronomy on a playground, dance to hip hop in front of a supermarket or do martial arts on a popular square.

## **Playfulness**

*Plastique Fantastique* uses temporary architectures as tools to investigate urban and social issues in a playful manner. On the one hand, playing can serve here as metaphor for the studio's strategy to intervene in public space: an iterative design approach that embraces chance, accidents and a multitude of participants. *Plastique Fantastique* plays with the neighbourhood, the existing buildings, trees or bridges. An oversized walk-in plant pot is placed around a tree in a Berlin street and turned into a vibrating pneumatic sound system together with sculptor Markus Wüste and composer Lorenzo Brusci (*Karl Marx Bonsai*, 48h Neukölln Festival, Berlin, 2008).

On the other hand, playing is meant quite literal. It is the most universal mode of interaction with their installations. They invite people to play with them – and with one another. Inflatables are fantastic, seductive and sexy – for people of all ages. The tactile and aesthetic qualities of the inflatables provoke quite immediate and sensual reactions, regardless of people's education, age or cultural background. The pneumatic structures are reminiscent of places, objects or architectures most people have vivid and positive memories of: fun fairs, balloons or bouncy castles. They do even hold erotic qualities. People react intuitively to them, be they in more figurative shapes, like a giant ring on the former city hall of Logroño (*RINGdeLUXE la Rioja*, at *Concéntrico Festival*, Logroño, Spain, 2018) or a walk-in strawberry ice-cream cone (*Strawberry Ice Cream Cone* –

100% Morango at 180 Creative Camp, Abrantes, Portugal, 2015), or in more abstract ones.

Play has a distinctive force to excite and to enthuse us. The act of playing unleashes an excessive joy that the toy-like interventions of Plastique Fantastique try to amplify. Why? They want people to have fun in public space and convince them that it is fun to become active in public space. Proposing objects or environments that people can project desires onto and that trigger their imagination, is an invitation to engage in exploration and creative processes.

### **Synesthesia**

Similar to some radical 1960's architects collectives, such as Haus-Rucker-Co, Plastique Fantastique is interested in challenging habitual perceptual patterns. We hear shadows (Loud Shadows | Liquid Events at Oerol Festival, Terschelling, The Netherlands, 2017) or colours (Sound of Light at Urban Lights Ruhr, Hamm, Germany, 2014). The rhetorical synesthesia in the title of their work "Loud Shadows | Liquid Events" refers to this quality of multisensorial experiences the installations of Plastique Fantastique hold. The project was developed for the 2017 edition of Oerol Festival, an annual performing arts and music festival held on the Dutch island of Terschelling. In collaboration with the dance company LeineRoebana from Amsterdam, the composer Kate Moore and The Stolz Quartet, the studio created an immersive performance in the Formerum forest on the island.

The interplay of material, movement and sound results in acoustic and visual distortions – a spatial experience in which different areas of perception are coupled.

The project is a collaborative piece realised by artists coming from different backgrounds: dance, music, architecture. Plastique Fantastique is, rather than a collective, a platform for temporary architecture on which different creative subjects like architects, sculptors, musicians, designers can contribute their expertise in various constellations. This form of cross-disciplinary collaboration is rooted in the very beginnings of the studio. Until now various projects were realised in cooperation with the artists Markus Wüste, Marco Barotti and many others.

### **Berlin**

The work of Plastique Fantastique is in many ways inspired by the ideas and attitudes of the radical artists and architects collectives of the 1960s and 1970s. But what has shaped the practice of the studio the most, were the experiences that its founder made exploring the various subcultures in the 1990s in Berlin. Marco Canevacci moved to the city in 1991, shortly after the Berlin Wall came down. The vacuum which was left by the disappearance of the East German State offered a special political situation characterised by a status of anarchy which allowed the appropriation of large empty parts of the inner city. The activists of the club and art scene continuously appropriated public space for temporary uses. Berlin was full of spaces that existed for a limited lapse of time. Plastique Fantastique is a product of the unique conditions of the time: the political establishment had quite a reactionary vision for the unified city. The way it was implemented in architecture and urbanism produced many banal results. At the same time there were plentiful subversive counter-strategies to do or think the development of Berlin. Indeed

Marco, who studied architecture at the Technical University of Berlin, could not imagine to work as conventional architects in this climate.

After having been "culture consumers" for several years, in 1999 Marco and some of his friends – Pietro Balp, Raffaele Distefano, Michael Heim, Pato Troncoso – became themselves an active part of the underground culture of the city. They rented a 2000 square meters former factory directly at the riverside in Berlin Friedrichshain and turned it into a club called „Deli an der Schillingbrücke“ offering a mix of different activities: techno, installations, concerts, video screenings, games and alike. The group realised quickly that the hall was too big to heat in winter and began to develop strategies to structure it spatially in order to gain warm spaces. Construction foil was the cheapest material they could find to produce their first lounge inflated with hot air. So they started working with pneumatic structures which led to the founding of *Plastique Fantastique*. At the moment the permanent members of *Plastique Fantastique* are Marco Canevacci, Yena Young and Daniel Felgendreher.

### **Softness**

From a purely pragmatic point of view, the spatial installations of *Plastique Fantastique* are particularly suitable for temporary events such as festivals, performances or concerts. Made of polyurethane, polyethylene, latex and textile, the volumes are easy to produce, to build up or dismantle within minutes. They can be used to temporarily induce strong atmospheres. However, beyond relying on the obvious advantages of plastic being cheap, flexible and easy to assemble, *Plastique Fantastique* is interested in a consequent, conceptual use of the eponymous material. By working with pneumatic structures made out of plastic the studio advocates a specific attitude towards the production of urban spaces, some sort of – to make an analogy to the material properties – softer approach. Working with inflatables defies stability or geometric perfection, which can be seen as quite problematic or even frustrating from the perspective of the architect. The behaviour of inflatable structures is often unpredictable. They can neither be fully controlled, nor permanently grounded. They are in constant movement. Wind can be monitored and an air pressure can be regulated. Yet, they seem to behave in a way that asserts a certain agency to them. Working with inflatables therefore bears risks and denies their designers full artistic agency. In the work of *Plastique Fantastique* this is a quality rather than a disadvantage. Working with structures that are flexible – soft – enough to be debatable, changed, or appropriated resonates with an interest in cooperative and community-based design processes or bottom-up planning strategies. The studio regularly initiates workshops with students or members of local communities to share know-how, ideas and opinions or discover pressing issues they experience in their neighbourhood or city.

The pneumatic installations of *Plastique Fantastique* can be monumental and fragile at the same time. With their softness they subvert conceptions of stability and permanence in architecture. Rather than working with conventional elements of the architect's or the urban planner's tool box, such as monumental, static, everlasting structures, inflexible and expensive materials or masterplans and rigid planning procedures respectively, the studio envisions a temporary urbanism with ephemeral experiments, removable and mobile interventions, inviting the public to participate in the process.



**Plastique Fantastique** is a platform for temporary architecture which samples the performative possibilities of urban environments. Established in Berlin in 1999, Plastique Fantastique has been influenced by the unique circumstances that made the city a laboratory for temporary spaces and has specialised in creating pneumatic installations as alternative, adaptable, low energy spaces for temporary and ephemeral activities. The transparent, lightweight and mobile shell structures relate to the notion of activating, creating, sharing and transforming public space and involving citizens in creative processes. They are in many ways the simplest of structures – a skin that separates but also connects. Pneumatic architecture is at the same time subversive and adaptable, welcoming fleeting activities and free experiments, breathing new life into the city and making the invisible visible. At present Plastique Fantastique develops project-oriented teams to realise a wide range of projects worldwide, depending on the specific request. A number of these site specific installations are realised in cooperation with other visual artists, sound and light designers, performing artists, composers and political groups.  
[www.plastique-fantastique.de](http://www.plastique-fantastique.de)

**Marco Canevacci** born 1970 in Rome, Italy.

Marco Canevacci is a Berlin-based artist. He moved to Berlin in 1991 and studied Architecture at Technical University Berlin. Since 1999 he has built large scale installations in different urban environments under the name of Plastique Fantastique.

**Yena Young** born 1982 in Seoul, Korea.

Yena Young is a Berlin-based artist. She studied architecture at the Yonsei University in Seoul and moved to Helsinki in 2008 to study Spatial Design at Aalto University. She joined Plastique Fantastique in 2012.

**Daniel Felgendreher** born 1987 in Dresden, Germany.

Daniel Felgendreher is a Berlin-based designer, writer and editor. He started studying architecture at the Technical University Berlin and graduated 2014 from the Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL) in London. He has researched and written about architecture, pop culture and urban development for online and print publications. In 2018 he joined Plastique Fantastique as a designer.

## AEROPOLIS

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/AEROPOLIS>

The concept of AEROPOLIS has been conceived following the invitation of Københavns Internationale Teater to join the Metropolis Festival 2013.

The architecture of the 100 sqm single-layer pneumatic structure has been designed with 2 optional „tops“ to allow maximal mobility and flexibility during its tour through 13 different locations in Copenhagen. Furthermore the installation always changes its shape into endless constellations by squeezing through the existing urban or natural environment - thus enhancing the perception of those peculiar public spaces by focussing them.

AEROPOLIS offers a communication platform to experience a sequence of 13 urban activities with changing scenographies all curated together with local cultural institutions: astronomy between two climbing walls in Nørrebro, kindergarten and hip hop in front of a supermarket in Valby, meditation and yoga by a lake in Vanløse, performances at Islands Brygge, martial arts at Superkilen, lectures in Amager, silent disco at one of the noisiest intersections in the city in Nordvest etc. The AEROPOLIS community centre breathes new life into the city and makes the invisible visible.

AEROPOLIS is a Plastique Fantastique project in cooperation with Københavns Internationale Teater on the occasion of the Metropolis Festival 2013.

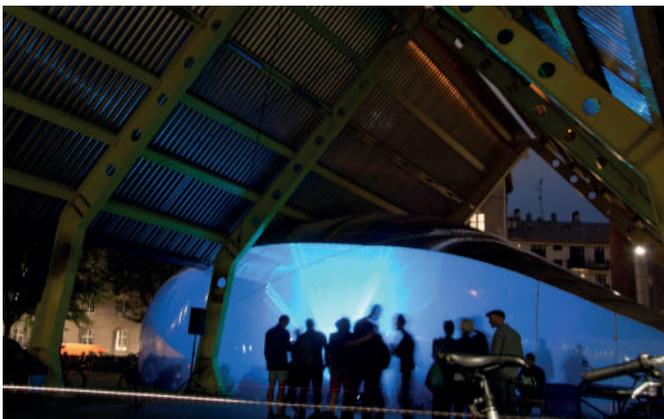


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**Credits**

Photo: Marco Canevacci, Camilla Mantovani

Video: Camilla Mantovani

Music: Marco Barotti

**PLASTIQUE FANTASTIQUE TEAM:** Marco Canevacci, Marco Barotti, Mirjam Dorsch, Sonia Garcia, Stephanie Grönnert, Antonia Joseph, Julia Lipinsky, Itxaso Markiegi, Manuela Milicia, Carsten Reith, Lorenzo Soldi, Markus Wüste, Yena Young.

## KARL MARX BONSAI

48 Stunden Neukölln, Karl Marx Allee, Berlin 2008

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/KARL-MARX-BONSAI>

1 trunk, 1 garbage can and 3 benches are temporarily merged into one walkable inflated structure: The Flowerpot. The newly generated pot-space is experienced, animated and amplified by sound - the Flower-Catalyzer. Lorenzo Brusci's compositions and the live acts of Marco Barotti give birth to a vibrating pneumatic sound system.







KARL MARX BONSAI is a joint project of  
Plastique Fantastique & Architettura Sonora.  
[www.architetturasonora.com](http://www.architetturasonora.com)

Photos: Marco Canevacci.



## **RINGdeLUXE la Rioja**

CONCÉNTRICO, Logroño's International Architecture and Design Festival 2018

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/RINGdeLUXE-LA-RIOJA>

RINGdeLUXE - a glamorous piece of jewelry worn by the building of the former city hall of Logroño, the capital of the Spanish province La Rioja, currently housing the Instituto de Estudios Riojanos.

The pneumatic structure of striking dimensions quickly reveals its lightness and simplicity. The soft shining leads the thread of associations from gangsta outfits towards an ingenuous love confession.

Not all that glitters is gold. Not all that vanishes is untrue.

The collective Plastique Fantastique realised this installation as part of the Concéntrico festival of architecture and design, which took place in Logroño from April 27th till May 1st 2018.





**Credits**

Team: Marco Canevacci, Daniel Felgendreher, Antonia Joseph, Maria Turik, Markus Wüste, Yena Young.  
Photos: Marco Canevacci.

**Thanks to**

Javier Peña Ibáñez ([Concéntrico Festival](#)).  
Rebeca Castellano and Reinhard Maiworm ([Goethe Institut Madrid](#)).  
Sebastián Andrés Podesta and Lucas Seré Peltzer (Los Argentinos).



## LIVEBOAT - Chapter 5

48 Stunden Neukölln, Berlin, June 2015

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/LIVEBOAT-CHAPTER-FIVE>

*Taking his trident in both hands,  
Poseidon stirs the sea into a fury  
and lashes up rain and squall.  
Mast and sail are torn away,  
Odysseus is thrown overboard  
and buried under a wall of water.  
When he emerges gasping and sputtering,  
he somehow manages to clamber back aboard.  
A goddess, Leucothea, appears to him in the form of a bird.  
She counsels him to swim for it.  
“Take my veil, tie it around your waist as a charm against drowning.  
When you reach shore, be sure to throw it back into the sea.”*

Homer, Odyssey, Chapter Five



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LIVEBOAT - Chapter 5 addresses the ongoing refugee tragedy in front of our borders and offers space for communication and discourses. After a long odyssey, an oversized lifeboat runs ashore on Tempelhof Airport. Inside the boat, multilingual extracts from Homer's Odyssey as well as fragments of refugee experiences are intertwined to a sound carpet.







**Credits**

Concept: Marco Canevacci

Design: Yena Young

Sound design: Marco Barotti

Interviews: Hadmut Bittiger

Coordination: Steffi Goldmann

Team: Mirjam Dorsch, Stephanie Grönnert, Hugo Luque, Simone Serlenga, Gabriel Spera

**Thanks to:** Martin Steffens, Franz Höfner, Markus Wüste, Andrea Klahold, Herr Gessner, Homer

**Kindly supported by:**

Aktionsfonds Quartiersmanagement Schillerpromenade

Kulturnetzwerk Neukölln e.V.

Bezirksamt Neukölln Fachbereich Kultur

Stiftung Umverteilen! AG dritte Welt Hier!

Grün Berlin GmbH

## **LOUD SHADOWS | LIQUID EVENTS**

OEROL FESTIVAL, Terschelling, The Netherlands

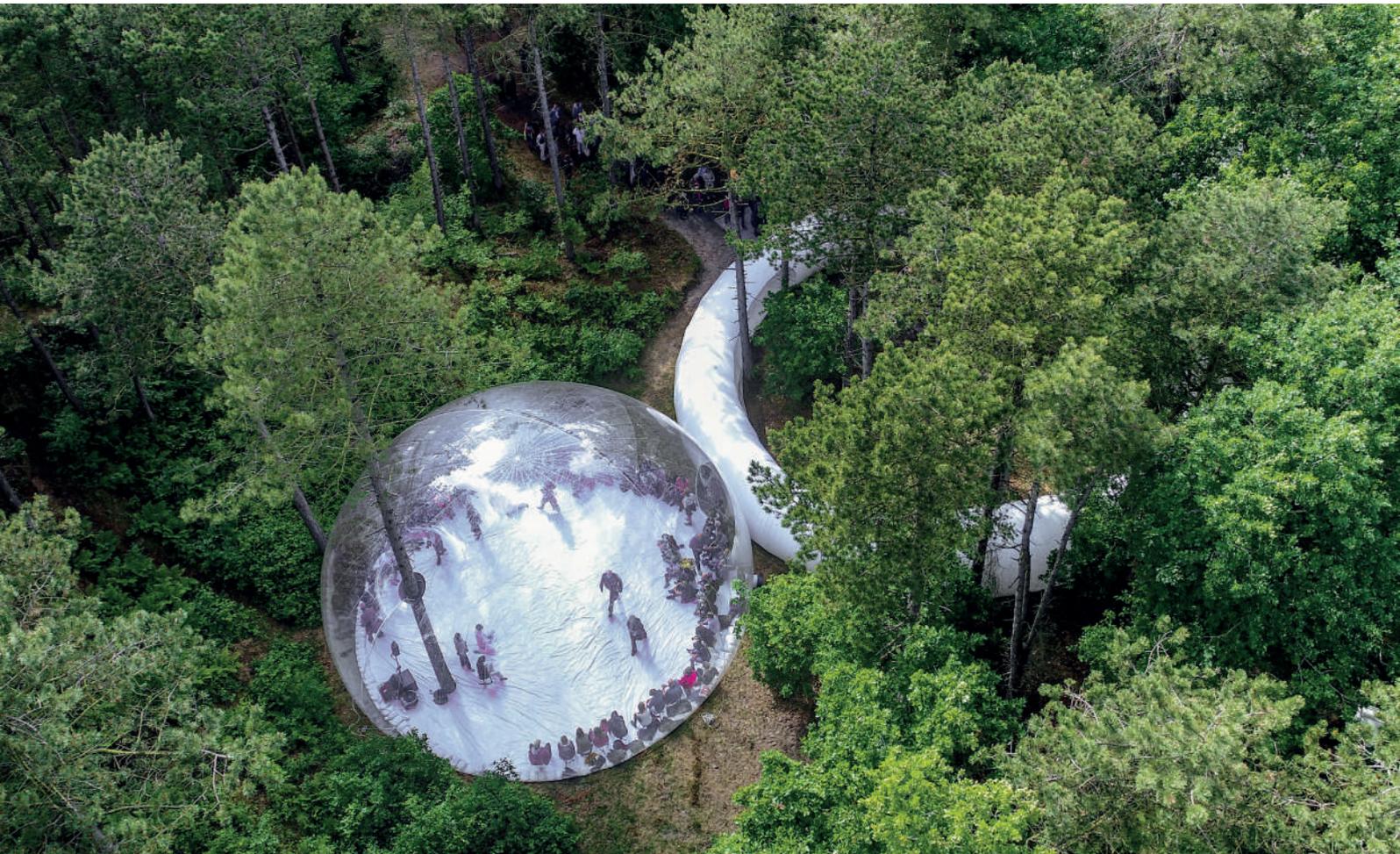
9 - 18 June 2017

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/LOUD-SHADOWS-LIQUID-EVENTS>

LOUD SHADOWS | LIQUID EVENTS is a collage made by artists coming from different backgrounds: dance, music, architecture. The team has been assembled as an experiment by Kees Lesuis — artistic director of the OEROL Festival — in order to give birth to a unique performance on the occasion of the 2017 edition of the festival.

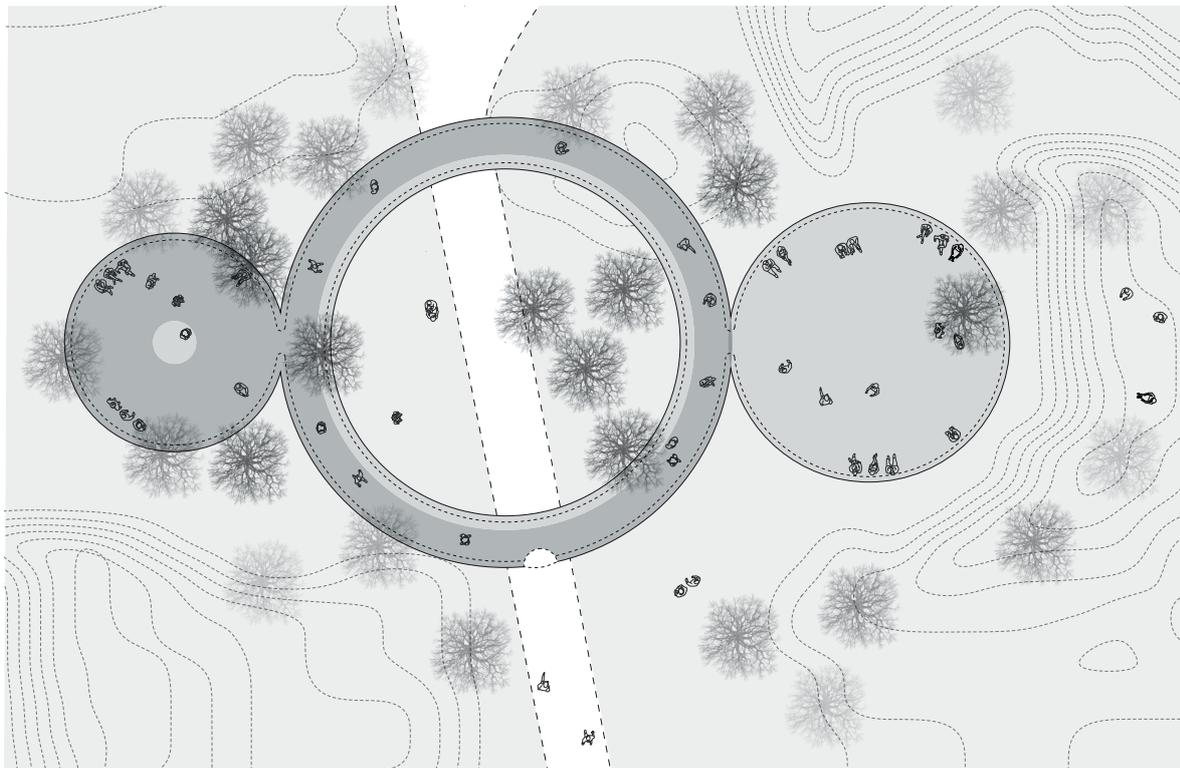
The temporary space of Plastique Fantastique is monumental, yet mobile, soft and transparent. Its ephemeral skin influences the surroundings as much as its inner space offers a lucid view outwards. It is a magical place to merge dance, music and nature, challenging our perception.

The architecture of LOUD SHADOWS | LIQUID EVENTS offers four different stages and it is designed considering the peculiar position of every single tree of the area located within the Formerum forest, on the island of Terschelling. Each element of this site specific project is integrated into its environment: the first transparent spherical stage is pierced by a tree, while the second stage (the milky translucent one) is squeezed between tree branches and comes under the projection of their shadows. The ring connecting the two stages loops around pine and oak trees creating the third stage in its void. The fourth stage is the forest around the installation.









Inside this constellation the audience is free to circulate and choose its place in the transparent stage, the milky sphere, the inner circle, or the surrounding woods. These movements are encouraged by the musicians (The Stolz) and dancers (LeineRoebana), which are playing and performing simultaneously through the different stages. Even the composition (Kate Moore) is affected by unpredictable natural elements like birds singing, leaves rustling, wind gusts or rain drops - thus making each performance unique.

LOUD SHADOWS | LIQUID EVENTS is a joint project of Kate Moore, The Stolz, LeineRoebana and Plastique Fantastique.

**Photos:** Jelte Keur, Marco Canevacci.

## SOUND OF LIGHT

Urban Lights Ruhr 2014, Hamm, Germany

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/SOUND-OF-LIGHT>

*"Half of the human brain is devoted directly or indirectly to vision"*

Mriganka Sur, Professor of Neuroscience, MIT

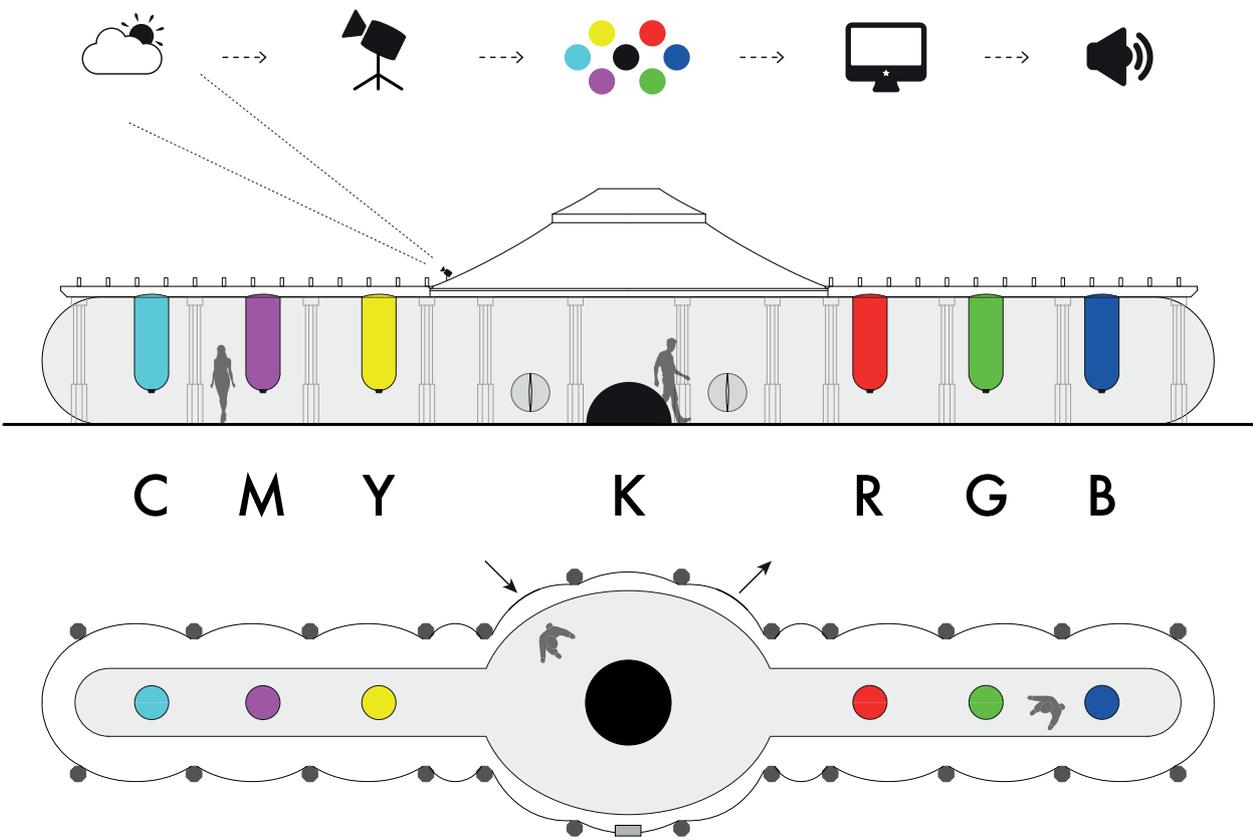
Imagine hearing the colours you perceive.

SOUND of LIGHT is a synesthetic sculpture which interprets and dynamically transforms sunlight into audio frequencies. It is a site specific installation designed for the former music pavilion in Hamm, Germany, which was built in 1912.

A high-quality digital camera mounted on the top of the structure films the sky and divides it into six colours - RGB and CMY. The six hanging, coloured columns of the pneumatic structure – which stand for the primary RGB (red/green/blue) and secondary CMY (cyan/magenta/yellow) colour models – are designed to receive different frequencies and convert them from visible to audible sensory input. A series of woofers is fixed directly on the bottom of each column and convert the whole architecture into a giant vibrating loudspeaker.

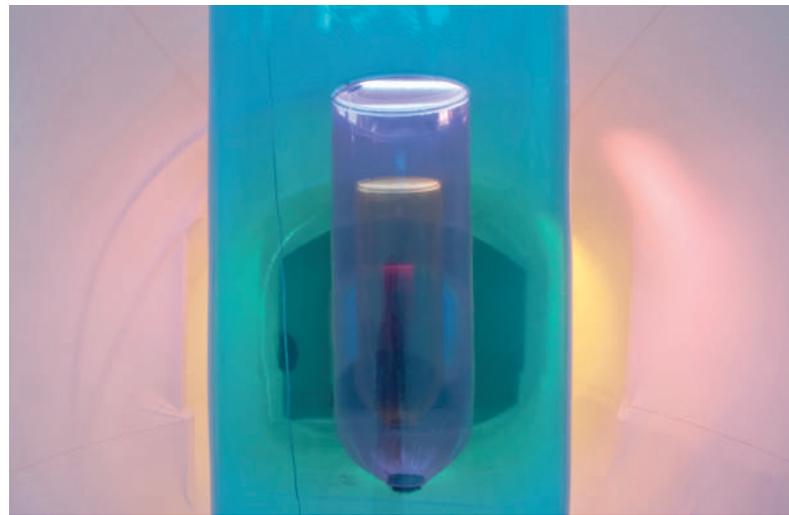
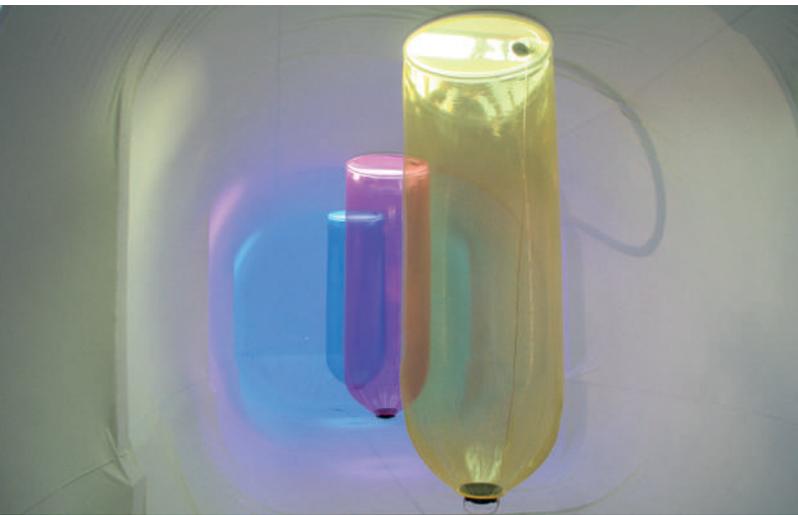
SOUND of LIGHT is a composition of hue, saturation, and light. By mixing sound and architecture, the audience experience a unique oneiric reality through the superimposition of colours, shapes, sounds and vibrations. Visitors can also discover their own concert by changing their point of view – an individual spectrum.







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**Credits**

SOUND of LIGHT is a joint project of Plastique Fantastique and Marco Barotti.  
<https://www.marcobarotti.com/>

Photos: Marco Canevacci, Simone Serlenga  
Video: Camilla Mantovani

## STRAWBERRY ICE CREAM CONE - 100% MORANGO

180 Creative Camp, Abrantes, Portugal

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/STRAWBERRY-ICE-CREAM-CONE-100-MORANGO>

Plastique Fantastique held a workshop for 180 Creative Camp in Abrantes, Portugal. The participants consisted of people interested in urban arts from different backgrounds. The aim of the workshop was to create temporary space to offer a playful place and enhance communication. This allows the historical center of Abrantes to re-activate the vibrance and encourages people to be aware of the neglected urban space in town.

**Photos:** 180 Creative Camp, Miguel Oliveira, Marco Canevacci.



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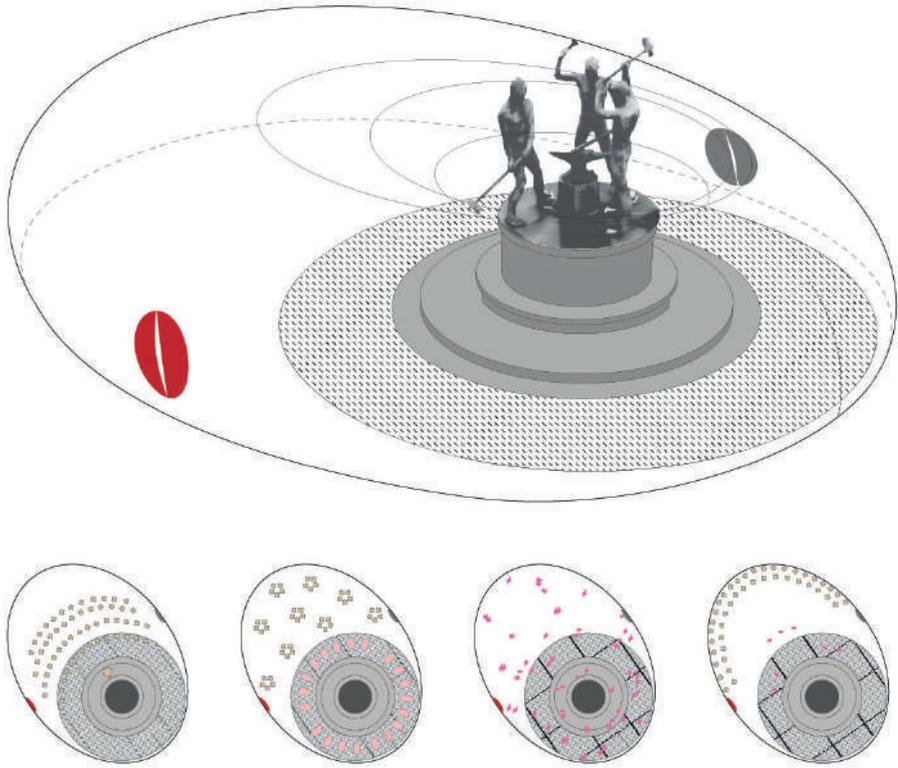
## superKOLMEMEN

Helsinki Design Week 2016, Finland

<https://plastique-fantastique.de/superKOLMEMEN>

superKOLMEMEN is an urban intervention, popping up temporarily for one week in the center of Helsinki, which will change the view and the perception of the place (Kolmen sepän aukio). The daily life scene, happening in the square that people pass by, sit, walk or drive through, will be converted to a playful environment where people can gather, talk, dance or relax. superKOLMEMEN will offer cultural experiences extending the summer fever to autumn - with a programs organised together with Helsinki Design Week.







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### **Credits**

PLASTIQUE FANTASTIQUE TEAM: Marco Canevacci, Yena Young, Mirjam Dorsch, Stephanie Grönnert, Antonia Joseph, Julia Lipinsky, Simone Serlenga, Christoph Tettenborn, Photos and video: Simone Serlenga,