# Anthony Rowe: Installation Artist

.. the end is to create ambiences and emotions…
I'm interested in movement and flow and presence….

Anthony Rowe is an installation artist who leads *Squidsoup* a highly successful group responsible for creating powerful immersive experiences. These works have been installed in a range of public spaces from art galleries to concerts and open-air festival events. He was inspired by a video work by Jim Campbell called Running Falling (2004), from which he learnt that the human brain needs quite minimal information in order to be able to construct a full picture. The work of Rafael Soto, a Venezuelan artist whose tactile works 'Penetrables' introduced him to the potential of physical interactive spaces was also very influential.

Over ten years his personal aesthetic surfaced as a preference for abstraction over narrative style. He has the training and skills of an engineer, a mathematician, a designer, a technologist, and a researcher. This 21st century artist was moulded by transformations in education, science and culture sitting on top of the rise of modernism in the 20th century. His is the voice of a quintessentially contemporary artist whose creative practice is steeped in reflection informed by deep levels of research exemplified in his PhD[1] and influenced by the collaborative process. He sees the role of digital technology as critical both as an enabler as well as "a source of inspiration", a trigger for creative reflection. Nevertheless, he recognises its limits in determining what the final artwork will be and affirms the vital role played by "artistic priorities". Without this, art that employs technology risks being perceived as a showcase for the technology over the art. Invisible to audiences but essential to the art is technology that facilitates the experience of encapsulated movement in light and sound. The disguise is intentional in order to directly engage the senses and emotions of the audience and to avoid provoking the rational intellect to respond.
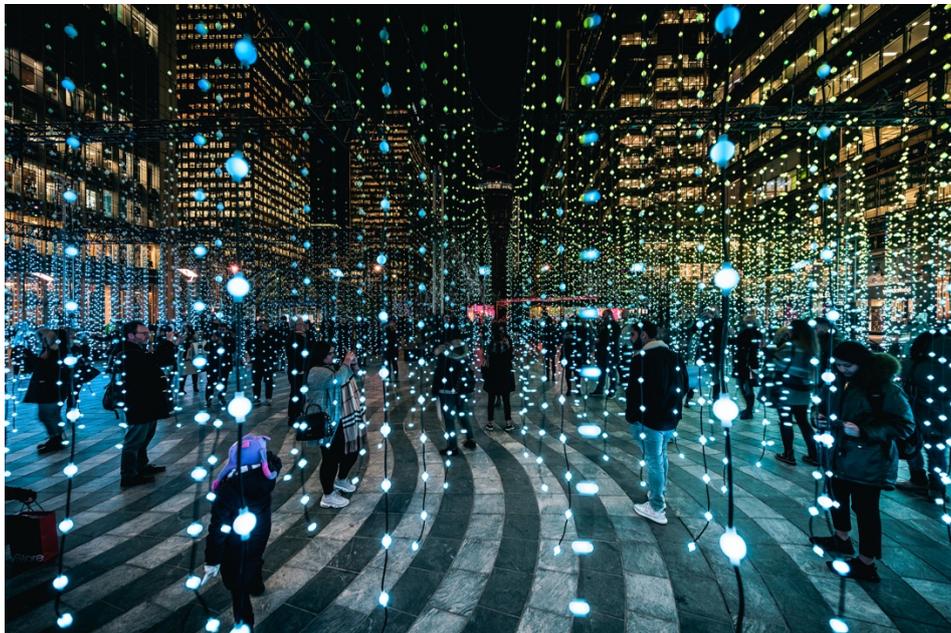
Submergence at Winter Lights 2019, Canary Wharf, London. Photo: Nunzio Prenna.

An interview with Anthony took place in November 2016 at St Pancras Station London. He describes his creative practice with the *SquidSoup* team and the way he sees reflection and collaboration.

Interview

Q: Can you describe how 'Submergence' came about?

A: In 2002 I saw the work of Jim Campbell (low res video work) in a show in Japan in Nagoya. I just loved it aesthetically...and the way he blurred it with Perspex's and so on was really exciting. And I started thinking, could that be done in 3D? It wasn't that the work before then hadn't worked because we'd shown it in Ars Electronica and Kinetica arts festival and so on. They'd been shown quite a lot but the one thing I really wanted to do, I hadn't managed to do for purely practical reasons until 'Submergence' was to have people inside it, to have people actually surrounded. That was the original idea which was to stick yourself inside it and for me to create an environment rather than an object.

The first version of 'Submergence' was built very quickly…The first week we put the thing up and got the lights to come on. It was entirely new technology to us, and until we actually flicked the switch we didn't know it was going to work at all. 'Submergence' was built in five days, five very long days and five days of extreme work…but because these volumetric media are pretty new, it's not until you are in it that you know what works anyway. You can do as many sketches as you like beforehand and come up with as many ideas as you like, it's not until you are actually there in the space, tweaking it.

Q: How did ideas like 'lanterns' and 'orbs' come about?

A: I think they were a combination of things really but they came together at the last minute. We did not go into that last week saying we are going to do these…. They were ideas that had come up but actually it was only when we saw it… the lanterns piece, for example, is actually a series of spheres moving slowly through the space that then respond to you when you walk up to them. Calling them lanterns was actually a last minute label. We went in there with probably a dozen or so ideas which were all very rough sketches and then by playing each one in the space, we went' I like that one' 'that looks like a Christmas tree so forget that', 'this works but you really have to know what it is, can we refine it?' And in the case of the last bit 'ecstatic', these expanding waves, it was just 'oh wow! We'll just leave that as it is, because that's brilliant. And then that whole structure, including the fact that it starts very gently with the lantern gradually builds up in intensity over the full movement…It's building up to a crescendo…The whole Ocean of Light/Submergence, I see not as an art work but as a medium. This is a way of placing a digital virtual architecture in a physical space in a way that you can spatially interact and coexist with it. In that way, it's got huge potential that we have only just begun to tap….

Q: In a sense, it could look as though the technology is driving the art. is that a fair assumption?

A: No. I don't think that's fair. The idea didn't come from technology; the idea came from a vision of what I wanted to experience myself. So, technology has been a limitation...but as a limitation it allows you to go in certain ways more than others. Obviously in anything technical, it is going to be a factor but I wouldn't say it was a driving force. it's a necessary evil if anything!

Q: It sounds as if you have to overcome the limits of it by finding something else, getting the right set of tools, environment that you can put together and build and then work out whether it's doing what you want it to.

A: It's all re-appropriated technology that reconfigured and restructured to do what we want it to do.

Q: Do you think if it as something that could be built into an architectural space rather than as an art work?

A: Yes. It is architectural in many ways and the content could be regarded as architectural as well. We have a couple of permanent exhibitions of the work. I am interested in anywhere really: I think it looks great pretty much anywhere and I want as many people as possible to see it. Note that does not mean it isn't art – the two not incompatible.

Sound is a crucial thing. This latest project we've just done (*Bloom* www.squidsoup.org/bloom) has 1000 individual spheres of light, each of which is connected via Wi-Fi so they can be choreographed and they also have a speaker, a primitive speaker in its tone but nevertheless you have a 1000 tone speaker that creates a very interesting almost symphonic experience.

Q: How does that work with the visuals?

A: That is what we have just done in this last project. Not so much in the *Ocean of Light* and *Submergence* which are very much a central system telling all the lights what to do whereas what we are trying to do now is

actually deconstruct that and have each thing as an autonomous unit. We are doing the relationship between sound and visuals as very simple and direct. volume, brightness and colours, pitch that sort of thing.... but it has a very strong effect and people understand those relationships quite well.

That project is very interesting being so de-centralised because we've got a thousand Arduino-like units (they are actually built bespoke, based on the Oak www.digistump.com) and a thousand of everything. The system is quite interesting because you can change all that code centrally on a server and then transmit it out. It takes a while to send it out to all one thousand but once they've all got the latest code then they can respond in unison. They could respond in unison across the planet!

Q: If things seem to take a wrong turning how do you handle that?

  A: Any work that is new, experimental and driven by research is bound to run the risk of failure at a variety of levels. So far, we have managed to resolve these issues through sheer determination and hard work. Installing at Kew involved some very long days and late nights. Not all projects turn out quite as we had hoped, but that is part of the risk with a new commission. Most clients understand this… and actually, the flexibility of the client, and the relationship that develops between artist and commissioner, is a very important part of the equation in producing the best final piece.

Q: Is evaluation or appraisal or assessment a part of your creative process?

A: Definitely. As I said above, our work is very iterative. 'The Ocean of Light' project has been going for ten years. The process of creating a work, and then evaluating it -in the field, in itself as compared to the initial vision, aesthetics, effectiveness, immersiveness, audience responses and feedback feeds directly into the next iteration of the project. The interaction designer in me is really interested in creating spaces and environments in which people can reflect themselves and can apply their own meaning to what they see. We are creating these things that are boiled down to the bare minimum so you can create whatever you want with the little information you're given. I am not trying to make cinema. I am not trying to tell people what to think but nevertheless I am trying to evoke these abstract powers. I remember the first time we got to walk through thing running in this gallery - 'Submergence'. We hadn't even run through any code in it just turned on the lights and thought "Oh Yes! This is going to work!' The whole building lit up!

Q: What does the phrase 'reflective practice' or 'reflection-in-practice' mean to you?

A: I would say that reflection is very integrated with the practice and it's very much a feedback loop. I am talking primarily about my own practice here and the work with Squidsoup. Our work tends to be very iterative so we take an idea and the first time we do it it's a total nightmare because so much of it is new but then we refine the bits of it that don't work so well. Each iteration is a result of the reflection of the previous one: so for example, the Ocean of Light projects, like Submergence, the first one of those we did in 2007 but we have done about 15 iterations since then and each one is very much looking at what we did before and how we can improve it, but not only how we can improve it but also what else we could do with that idea.

Q: Does the reflection come from the making process?

A: Yes, but not only. It comes from the making: you come up with an idea, you try and make that idea and as you are making it something else may emerge: the idea for a variety of reasons sometimes through practicality some of them to do with inspiration. That initial idea in our case may change, or develop, before it's finished. That's a result of reflection on other things but also the result of practical limitations and so on. But then we look at the final work and use those observations as inspirations for further projects - so that's reflection on the practice and the work.

Q: How much change goes on during the process?

A: Quite a lot quite often and that's because we're fairly pragmatic in a lot of ways, in that we have an idea of what we want to do and how to get there but as we start building it, other opportunities appear and they may be a short cut to where we are trying to go but the result of taking that short cut might put a different inflection on the work. And then we have to reflect on whether we want that or not. It's a constant balancing act and this is happening all the time.

Q: It is interesting to see how much the space influenced the behaviour of the people coming in: the quiet contemplative versus the more excitable, daring behaviour. Is that also something you take account of now?

A: Yes. Obviously, the contemplative stuff happens generally more inside than outside, but I could say, or we could say, I could go for the strong visceral experience and we are only going to put it in a black cube where we can control it and so on. But I am much more interested in public intervention and putting it in weird spaces and introducing it as an experience to people who aren't expecting it and wouldn't go to an art gallery.

Q: And then you have the audience…Was it surprising how they behaved or did you anticipate that?

A: I anticipated I suppose the feeling of awe - the strong experience. My hope was that people would go in and say 'Wow!' - the sense of being sensorially immersed and being engaged with it - not looking at it analytically but just feeling it and being affected by it. I anticipated that kind of response. I wasn't anticipating the whole party thing, the fact that it sometimes turns into an impromptu party space. We didn't anticipate that and also we didn't anticipate the whole selfie thing- the fact that you're in a bunch of lights that are quite close to your face and it becomes a very photogenic experience. That was a surprise!

Q: Has that sort of behaviour, and the risky behaviour (wrapping LEDS into hammocks) changed the way you make the work now?

A: We warn the client that it needs to be invigilated properly. That's always going to be the case in a piece, especially if it's outdoors, because in public spaces, people feel more free. If it's in an art gallery there's a certain amount of implied respect and you treat it differently to if it's on the way to Old Trafford, for example, where people see it as more of a challenge! But you live and learn. The only other thing I'd add is that in order to get an audience to respond emotionally or affectively rather than logically and analytically, is by getting rid of any reference to technology as much as possible…the sensor is discrete in a corner, there are no computers in sight, all the power supplies and the cables, the tech is hidden.

Q: Is it a team effort to do the software and hardware as well?

A: Yes. It is hard to break down…There is also a fair amount of compromise- we are a group so it's not one person's singular vision that governs the whole thing. I am the lead and this particular project was my idea but nevertheless, there are huge amounts of it that haven't come from me. I think that's a positive thing. It has a lot more in it than if it had just been me and my very reductionist minimalist tendencies. I can't tell people what to do because there isn't enough money for me to pay them properly; if I don't pay them properly I can't tell them what to do. We also have a much more democratic and positive approach to the whole creative process anyway. I don't want minions. We are equals. I want people who will challenge my ideas and come up with better ones…

Q: From your point of view, what kinds of skills...qualities are necessary in your team?

A: Well, each one of us has got a core skill whether it is music, coding, graphic design, interaction design, whatever... and you bring that as a basis. But also, you need a whole bunch of other qualities: you need to be creative, you need to work with a team, you need to be able to fit in which not everybody can into the kind of structure we were talking about earlier you know where there isn't really a boss, you are expected to come up with ideas on your own and you do all that kind of stuff- and for no pay! We have been playing around with these things for ten years.

Q: What are the hardest things to deal with working collaboratively?

A: Working at a distance can be frustrating – half our team on our most recent project is based in Australia. Skype can only capture so much, especially on limited bandwidth. If one group has one idea and the other has another, reconciling the two can be troublesome. (*and in the public arena?*) The weather, and the public: two unpredictable and destructive forces!

Q: Is collaboration essential to your creative work?

A: It means that as many aspects of the production as possible are made by people involved creatively. And more heads are good – it is a filter and an amalgamator. We all think in different ways, and come up with different approaches and ideas. I think the end results bear this out. I think the end results bear this out. The trick is to know when to say 'that's it- we are doing this'. Otherwise, the possibilities become endless.

Q: How does working with others affect the way you assess or evaluate what you do?

A: I assess it in my way, colleagues do it in their way. We often want different things from a project and so you end up with multiple assessments. This is then discussed and poured back into the pot for the next cycle.

[1] Rowe, A. (2015) Immersion in Mixed Reality Spaces. Doctoral thesis The Oslo School of Architecture and Design, Norway: ISBN978-82-547-0279-6