

Joanie Lemercier/Oli Sorenson

Oli Sorenson

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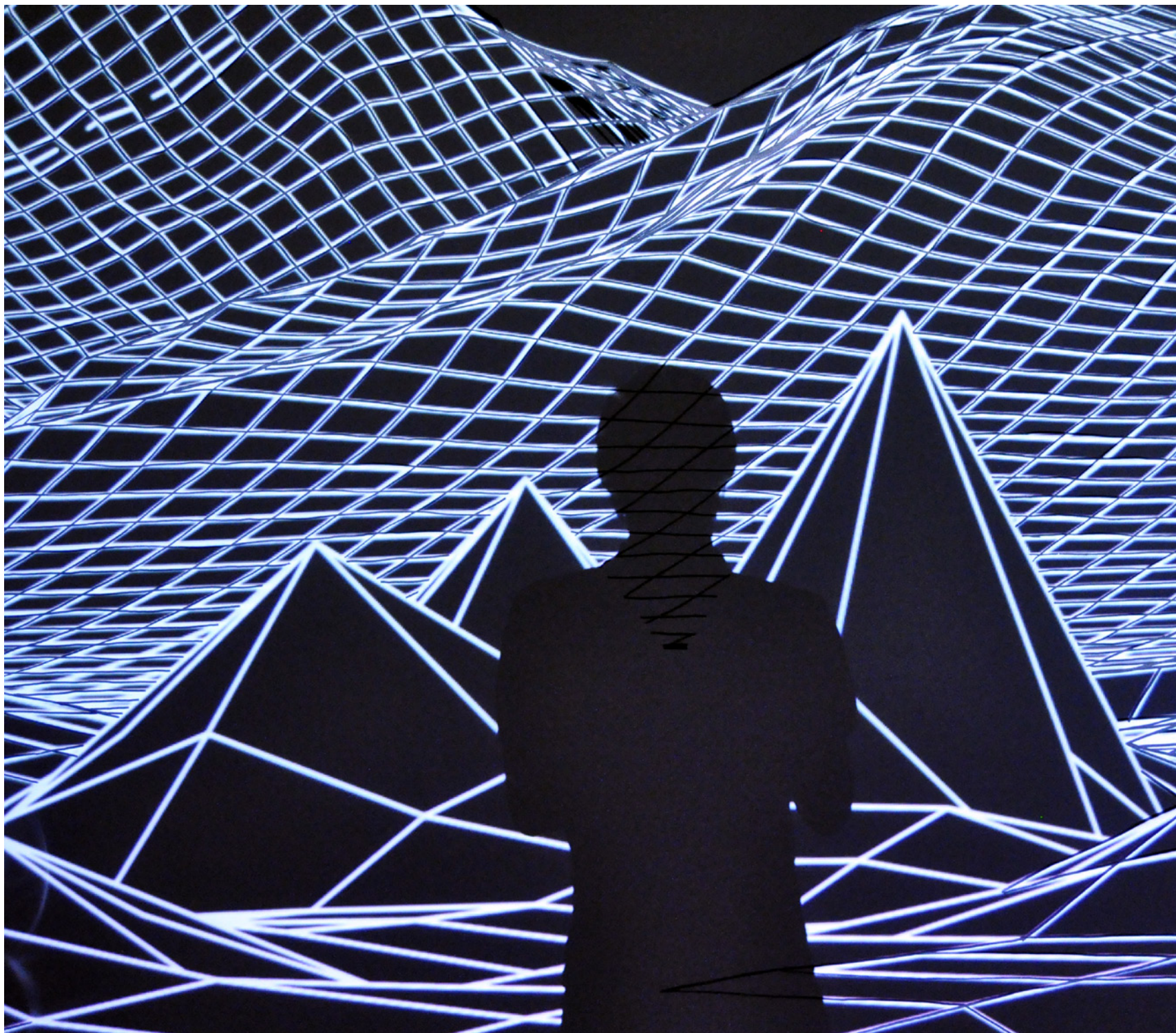
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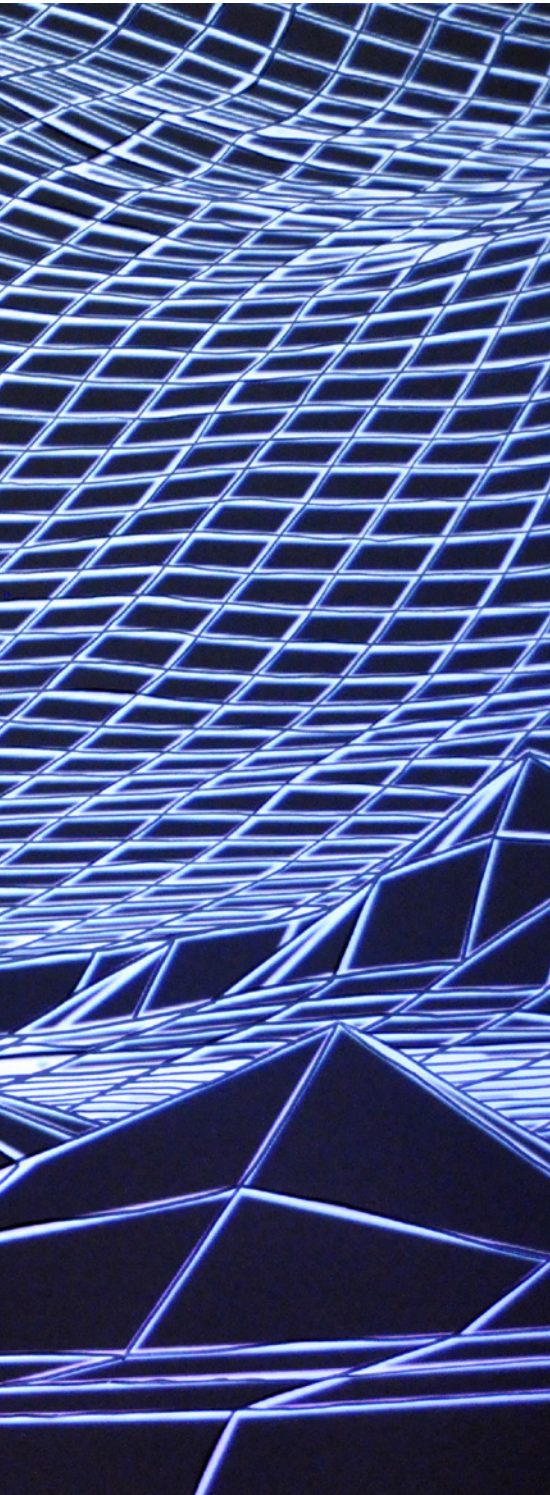
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Joanie Lemerrier, *Silhouette*.

JOANIE LEMERCIER / OLI SORENSON



Joanie Lemerrier figures among the leading artists to emerge from the projection mapping movement of the mid-2000s. A founding member of the AntiVJ collective, the French creator initially focused on light installations that enhance the architectural features and spatial awareness of building facades. He later conceived stage designs for musical concerts at MUTEK and the 2012 Cultural Olympiad in London and more recently, exhibited works at the China Museum of Digital Art in Beijing. Now represented by Muriel Guepin Gallery in New York, Lemerrier met with Oli Sorenson for an exclusive *ETC MEDIA* interview to share his thoughts on public art in the digital domain.

Oli Sorenson: Thanks Joanie for this meeting. So is it true that your creative approach to digital art originated in VJ performance?

Joanie Lemerrier: My pleasure. Yes, I started doing visuals around 2004 for local club nights in Bristol (UK), which had a rich music scene. But I quickly felt the limitations of VJing on screens behind the DJ and realized that I could project on all the walls and the entire architecture of venues. Between 2006 and 2007, I discovered other VJs working in similar ways: Yannick Jacquet was using transparent materials to add depth to his projections, Romain Tardy was projecting onto paper sculptures, and Olivier Ratsi worked on multiple outputs. We were all fed up with boxed-in projections because we were looking all day at rectangular displays on laptops, phones, TVs, and cinema screens. Everything was stuck in a rectangle, so projection mapping allowed us to use any shape as a canvas, really. We joined forces and started doing projects under the collective name AntiVJ.

OS: Did you call yourselves AntiVJ to break away from the club scene and onto new creative grounds?

JL: We continued to VJ every weekend, go to festivals, and share ideas on sites like VJ Forums, so we were definitely still in the scene. But we also started more experimental projects. We came up with AntiVJ as a joke, to make it easier to explain that we were doing something other than loop-based VJ content on rectangular screens. We were aware of other artists, including Pablo Valbuena's augmented sculptures, Michael Naimark's dynamic video installations, and the black-and-white aesthetics of Raster-Noton, Ryoji Ikeda, and Alva Noto. So it seems we were part of a larger zeitgeist rather than innovators. But I guess we were there at just the right time when coding software and tweaking hardware were more accessible and affordable, and that explains why mapping became so popular.

OS: When you started to do architectural mapping projects about ten years ago, projection technologies were just calibrated for flat surfaces, right?

JL: Right. At the time, what really helped me was my training as a web designer. I was coding ActionScripts in Flash, so when I got stuck in conventional VJ software that had only limited calibration settings, I started using Flash to build my own tools to distort the video output and draw vectors directly onto the architecture of buildings. Also, working with other artists really helped me. Sharing ideas with them helped me to go further than the limitations of existing technologies.

OS: And how did you book your first contract? Was it difficult to convince municipalities to project images on public building facades?

JL: Not really. I think the Internet helped us overcome this problem. Between 2006 and 2008, I started a blog and posted recordings of really small projects in my bedroom, done with a cheap projector I got on eBay. I was also putting stuff on YouTube, which gave me an amazing exposure, and through this, we got our first commission. Our first project was with the Bristol City Council. They saw the YouTube clips and asked us to do something similar on the City Hall's 100-meter-wide facade. Fortunately, the Council found all the equipment we needed, which we had absolutely no other way to access. With other commissions, the cities, festivals, and other cultural bodies would provide us with staff to work with. So the booking process was really easy because not many people were offering mapping projects yet. But after 2008, mapping became really popular, and ad agencies started having a go at it. They would actively seek out opportunities and offer complete event packages, and this is when we slowly lost interest in the format. We were seeing really random things like dolphins, Pac-Man games, and exploding brick walls, which had no connection with the architecture they were being projected on. When we started out, we would build storyboards, research the building's history, and develop an idea that was meaningful to the site's heritage. We were trying to craft meaningful pieces, but when mapping became trendy, the value of telling stories was completely overshadowed by agencies projecting Coca-Cola logos for 100,000 euros, when we would spend months to handcraft projects for not much money.

OS: Does this change also mark the period when you started working as a solo artist?

JL: Yes. Working within a group was exciting and fruitful for a time, but I guess we also reached certain limits. We were doing large projects in public spaces, which needed months of planning, a production team, a pre-production team, and a lot of expensive equipment. So many variables made it harder to focus on creative content. AntiVJ acted as an art collective and after a while, it was taking us a very long time to make common decisions and plan our artistic vision. I realized that I could





develop my ideas on a much smaller scale and maybe even say more with this intimate format. As our careers evolved, we all felt that working as solo artists made more sense, although we still collaborate on one-off projects.

OS: Have you ever worked on long-term installations that needed to run for many years?

JL: I wish we could have done more but a few of years ago, AntiVJ produced a permanent project in Wrocław (Poland) called O (Omicron) and directed by Romain Tardy and Thomas Vaquier. I worked on the technical support and some of the content. The project is still up and running in a huge concrete dome. Hopefully it will stay there for a few decades before the projector and media server stop working. But this project has already been seen by tens of thousands of people because it's part of a museum, and the show is open every day. One of the project's limitations is that it's difficult to keep track of because the people that commissioned us are no longer working at this institution.

OS: Did the experience you gained from this project help you work around some of the constraints associated with the brief lifespan of digital devices?

JL: I find this is a really exciting topic because I'm a bit of a geek myself. As a web developer and coder, I have assimilated an extensive knowledge base on software and computer environments, so it's easier for me to estimate how reliable a solution will be. I tend to work only with open-source software because I have no guarantee for how long proprietary software from private companies will be around. I went to a lot of talks on digital art conservation, and this is where I heard Ben Fino-Radin, who used to head MOMA's department of media conservation. He talked about emulation as our strongest strategy to maintaining applications. Not everything can be emulated, so right now I'm working with coding WebGL and JavaScript, which have been around for more than a decade. Because it's possible to emulate any version of any browser from the past, I know that web technologies should be fairly easy to run in ten, twenty or fifty years' time, since they are independent of any operating system or machine. I heard another talk yesterday at Art Brussels, in which dealers from top-selling commercial galleries like Pace talked about collecting digital art. It's funny because I thought I would learn a lot from these galleries, but I discovered that they have no clue about how to conserve digital art. Galleries are not going to teach artists about digital art conservation; we have to teach them how digital art can come into the art market and develop into lasting forms that will be part of art history.

OS: As you transitioned from creating installative performances to art objects, did you need to adjust the techniques and aesthetics of your practice?

JL: The adjustments I had to make had more to do with the art market than with the art world itself. I found that my ideas are absolutely compatible with the art world, and my vision is the same for large or small projections. But to be market-friendly and sell in a gallery, my art had to fit in a box. I didn't really change the essence of the work but only its shape and design. It's a bit weird because I needed to reassure collectors by offering something easy to store and set up. In terms of techniques and concepts, I didn't change anything. I just had to package my work like a product to make it collector-friendly. To be honest, it's an interesting exercise.

This interview was done by Oli Sorenson