Erwin Redl in Madison Square Park

To hear Erwin Redl tell it—or to have heard him tell it, anyway, the first day I happened to meet him, early this past November, a week or so after Halloween, as he and his team began laying in the various survey and grid pegs mapping out what was to become the armature of his latest outdoor on-site installation, which he had taken to calling "Whiteout"—vectors from virtually his entire life seemed to be converging upon the vast central oval greensward there in Madison Square Park, in the shadow of midtown Manhattan's Flatiron Building.

Between exacting measurements and careful squint-eyed confirmations, Redl, a handsome, wiry man of average height and an engaging if somewhat indefinable mittel-European manner, with a close-cropped squarish head accented by glasses, proceeded to tell me how, though he has been based in mittel-*America* for many years now, Ohio to be precise, he actually hails from Austria. "Vienna?" I asked. "My grandfather came from Vienna." No, he corrected me, with seemingly well-trod forbearance: he'd been born (in 1963) in the little village of Gföhl, about sixty miles northwest of Vienna. (I subsequently looked the place up, and it hardly makes the map at all, though it is nestled at around the midpoint of the triangle formed by Vienna, Linz, and Brno, Slovakia, respectively.) "A little village deep in the countryside," Redl explained. "North of the Danube, so the area has an altogether different geological character than the Alpine region. Very hilly, granitic. More like upstate New York. And very densely forested, still."

And had that affected his take on the world, the fact that he grew up there and not, say, in Vienna? "Very much so," he insisted, as he now traipsed out another measurement, with me scrambling along in tow. After double-checking, he leaned down to hammer in a sort of tent peg topped by an orange ribbon. "To begin with, I spent most of my youth out in nature. I mean, we'd come home from school, do our little homework, grab our bikes, and just go hurtling into the surrounding forests." He spread his arms wide, taking in the park. "So I feel very at home among trees: the woods were my original playground!" After pausing, he continued, "And such an upbringing gives one a very different sense of time as well: one becomes sensitized to the slow cycles of nature, and more specifically, the distinctly cyclical nature of time itself. And all that even more so in that we were Catholics in a very Catholic part of the country, and the Church, too, was steeped in slow time and long cycles: there's Lent and then Easter and then harvest, every year the same."

What had his parents done? "My father was a carpenter, he had a little furniture and cabinetry factory. And I grew up helping out in that workshop, building things. Before I could walk or talk, they tell me, I was building things. And as it happens, my father's main client was the Church: pews, benches, confessionals, altars. We would travel from village to village, I'd go along with him and pitch in, stretching out the tape as one did in those days, calling out the numbers and watching my father as he then rendered the measurements onto his architectural sketches. And in that way, I was gaining a great affinity for structure, too, from early on. Not just time but also space.

Fig. 9

Fig. 10

And specifically, a sense of *sacred* space, a sense of space and place that tied back almost two thousand years—there's no denying it: that, too, seeped into my sense of things, and even after the religion as such ceased to matter so much to me, that sense of the sacredness of space and structure, whether in buildings or in nature, and in particular in parks" (which, come to think of it, constitute a sort of cross between buildings and nature—nature embedded amongst buildings) "has persisted in me." (Funny, I said: my relatively lapsed Viennese Jewish grandfather used to always speak approvingly of religion as a *tying back*, from the Latin, re-*ligare*, as in ligament.) Redl nodded his concurrence and leaned over to hammer in another stick post and then tie on its little orange flag.

And what of his education? "At fourteen," Redl recounted, "I was sent off to a boarding high school closer to Vienna, a polytechnic. There were two tracks at that point in the Austrian educational system, the language/humanities one and the other, the so-called polytechnic, which is the one I took, with more emphasis on math and geometry and sciences, and in my case, a further emphasis on what was slated to be my eventual trade: furniture making. We had wood shop there at school, and I remember how we were trained in tongue-and-groove construction, which is to say without any nails or screws or glue, all very satisfying."

We ambled back to the temporary tented shed along the northern edge of the greensward that was serving as the project's Mission Control: a makeshift table, a few chairs, plastic milk boxes full of equipment piled off to the side. "Meanwhile, though," Redl continued, "I was increasingly being drawn to music. All Austrian bourgeois children are encouraged to take up an instrument of some sort, and mine was the classical guitar, with which I was becoming increasingly engaged—that and its various rock 'n' roll band sidelights. I wanted to pursue that further, but my father was opposed, insisting there was no livelihood to be had in music. We had our fights over that. Finally, he said that if I just finished my furniture studies, I could do whatever I wanted after that. Which is how I came to find myself at the music academy in Vienna, where indeed it was all about structure again, only this time across time rather than space." (Indeed, I interjected, for, as my composer grandfather always used to say, the key thing in music was form, which he defined in terms "architectonic," which is to say the sequential exposition of material in a formful manner—with widenings, narrowings, sidebars, joinings, buttressings, and so forth—but across time rather than space. Yes, yes, exactly, Redl chimed in, what had I said my grandfather's name was? I hadn't, I replied, but it was Toch, Ernst Toch, a leading figure in the Weimar-era Neue Sachlichkeit modernist movement in Berlin, and subsequently, in exile, a film composer in Hollywood. But the thing of it was, I continued, for him it all had to be organic as well, the *architectonic-organic*, he would say, and a good model for that, he'd go on, could be the way sap rises and courses through and presently helps to shape a tree. Redl reached for a sheet of paper and jotted down my grandfather's name.)

"Well, meanwhile at the Academy," Redl resumed, "I myself was growing more drawn to contemporary trends in composing, and electronic music in particular—Stockhausen, Reich, but especially John Cage—and starting to try my own hand at that. In those days we were still working with found and synthesized sounds, which we would lay in on audiotape, physical tape which we would then physically cut, with scissors, laying out the strips in long parallel lines, hanging from a horizontal bar in ordered ranks, which could get to look like an Agnes Martin painting, very striking in and of itself; and then we would mix and match those, playing the results on reel-to-reel machines, cutting and joining and layering some more—all this by way of very structured, albeit highly abstract ways of proceeding. Snippets of tape standing in for snippets of time, which we could in turn see playing out on our various monitors, and I myself became more and more fascinated by those visual representations, and the ways in which squeezing or stretching those in turn generated fresh sounds, and vice versa. The ways, too, in which it was all a question of wavelengths, of frequencies—how at one wave scale you generated sound, but at another you could generate light and color. These were the years in which the personal computers were beginning to become available, so I was at the same time learning to code, all the while teaching classical guitar on the side in order to finance my various passions."

Redl moved to the United States in the summer of 1993 under a Fulbright grant to study computer art at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (emerging with an MFA two years later). He never returned to Austria for any particular length of time thereafter. (Between 1993 and 2007, he was based in New York City, transplanting himself to Bowling Green, Ohio, in December 2007, initially on account of a relationship with a woman who taught in the music department at the university there. Since 2015, though, he has maintained a second studio in Long Island City and divides his time among Ohio, New York, and various far-flung installation sites.)

It was at SVA that Redl developed a fascination with the so-called Land artists, masters like Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, and James Turrell, who'd undertaken massive, sometimes almost Herculean projects, in some of the most remote stretches of nature,

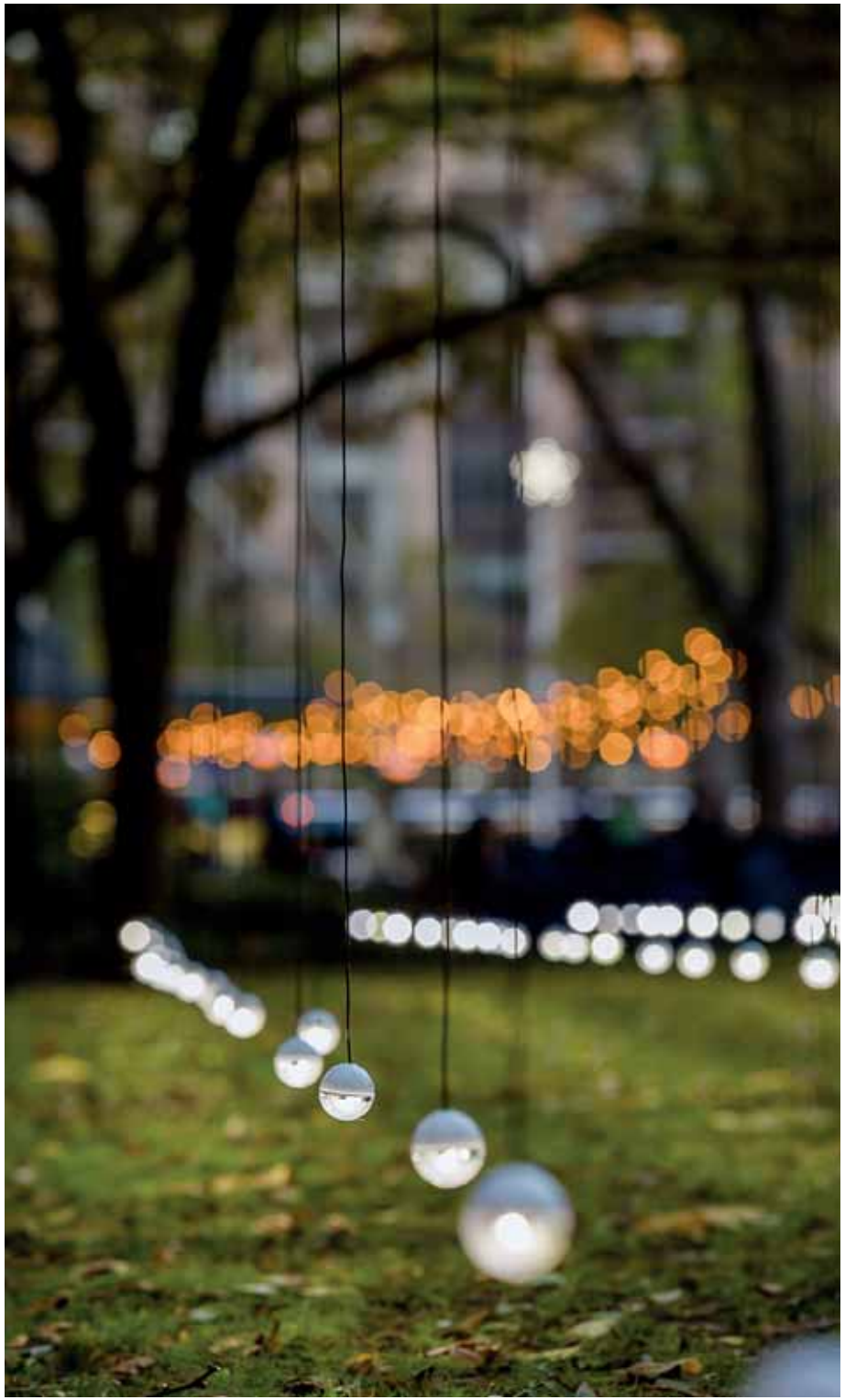

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

usually windswept desertscapes out West. In addition, he came under the thrall of several of the so-called Light and Space artists, mostly Californians grouped around the likes of such older masters as Robert Irwin, Douglas Wheeler, Larry Bell, and again James Turrell, who tended to pitch their practice in the phenomenology and sheer marvel of perception itself. But whereas these artists, almost all of whom derived from a generation or two prior, had primarily worked long-term with the specifics of extended single sites (Walter De Maria's *Lightning Field*, Heizer's *City* [Fig. 12], or Turrell's *Roden Crater* [Fig. 13]) or reveled in the marvels of natural outdoor light or carefully calibrated unitary effects of artificial light projections at individual sites (Turrell's or Wheeler's rooms; Irwin's wildly various site-conditioned installations), Redl, for his part, had become entranced, as we have seen, with the possibilities afforded by ever more dazzling digital operations and cutting-edge LED deployments, "getting at similar themes," as he says, "to those of those older guys—the character of experience itself, the capacity for perceiving how we ourselves perceive—but more often by way of all these remarkable new technologies.

"And all of that, of course, feeds into this." He stretched out his arms, taking in the splay of tent pegs divvying up the entire oval, tree-girdled lawn. "Now, of course, in the meantime, since my original college days, there've been considerable advances, and a good deal of miniaturization. You no longer need all those cumbersome computers and oscilloscopes. In fact, for this project, when we finally have the whole thing mounted and running, come back and you'll see, the brains of the entire program are going to be housed in this little gizmo here." He reached into a side pocket and pulled out a little plastic orange box, about the size of a tape measure. "Once programmed, this will be running the whole thing."

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I had to be heading on, but we made a date for a few days hence, and Redl returned to his labors. In the event, I was a few hours late for our next appointment and the team had decamped, but the pegs were all in now and some were already beginning to be replaced by tall steel poles, four long rows of them, two rows to each side, running the north-south length of the oval, as playful squirrels chased each other in frisky scampering pairs, slaloming up and down the lanes.

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By the time I returned, a few days later, virtually the entire armature had been laid in: the rows of steel poles had been joined at their tips by perpendicular east-west steel cables,

Fig. 13

one set to the east and another to the west, and from those steel cables the team had suspended virtually invisible thin wires, stretched down to pendulum-like little golf-ball-size lightbulbs (white-capped atop and transparent below), ten per lateral cable, approximately nine hundred in all, evenly spaced, spread in a compounding array like a flat notional carpet, hovering about twelve inches off the ground, casting their white glow earthward.

"Though look again," Redl advised me when I found him at the far south end of the oval, double-checking some of the measurements. "The carpet, as you call it, isn't a flat plane at all. See how the lawn slopes imperceptibly downward to both sides, east and west, probably for reasons of drainage or some such. In fact, there's a fairly pronounced convexity: the far edges of the oval are eighteen inches lower than the central spine. These are the sorts of specific conditions every fresh site affords, and one has to respond. In this instance, for example, I had to decide whether to insist on the sheer flatness of the plane, or rather to subtly bend the carpet of lights, such that they conformed to the curvature of the ground below. If I'd done the former, there would have been an oddly unsettling effect, especially for the viewers of the piece out there on the paved paths surrounding the oval, as if one were looking up a skirt. And actually, I prefer it this way: the slope is so subtle you hardly notice it, but the curve enforces a soft and pleasing tension. Still, in order to achieve such a slope, you'll notice that the hanging plumb lines have each had to be recalibrated so that all the bulbs are suspended precisely the same height above their specific patch of ground."

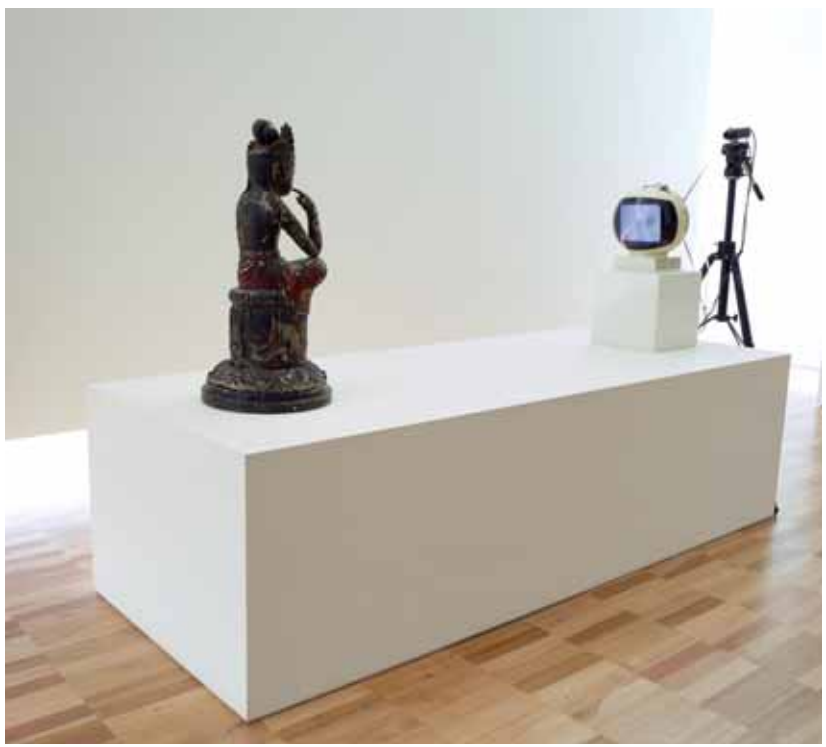
We started walking up the empty central alley, back to the makeshift Mission Control tent, one long matrix of lights to our lateral left, the other to our right, and as one even east-west row of lights after the next went coursing by, uncannily straight diagonals suddenly started likewise popping up momentarily to our forward left and right and just as quickly disappearing (the sort of magical thing that regularly happens when you drive by a well-laid fruit tree orchard). The ground, for its part, seemed oddly greener than it had the other day: had they done something to effect that transformation as well? "No," Redl laughed. "I had the same thought when we came out here this morning, but look again. Last night we had the first cold snap of the season, the temperature plunged

Fig. 14

below freezing, and as a result, the ginkgoes must have all shed their still-green leaves simultaneously. Talk about a carpet! But again, these are the sorts of things one can't possibly predict and that always render these projects so exciting."

On the table under the tent, Redl's laptop was hooked up to the diminutive boxy orange "brain," which he was in the process of programming. "You see how it is now out there," he said, pointing: "All the lights on. But with a flick of a switch"—his hand raced over the laptop keyboard—"I can turn them all off"—and off they all went. "Now, for instance, I can turn on only the northern half of the lights on the long array over here to the right, and only the southern half over there to the left"—just so—"and I can even get those blocks of lights moving, as it were, in opposite directions." And indeed, the individual rows of lights obediently started turning themselves on and off to effect precisely such an illusion: rectangles of light briskly marching in opposite directions. "I can even fade the on-off switches so they are not quite so abrupt, yes, I think that's nicer." The blocks of lights now seemed to slide more gracefully up and down the park in obverse syncopation. "Or. . ." He turned off all the lights, and tapped in a few further commands. "I can vary the effect." He pushed a last key and the lights turned on again, only this time in staggered rows: three east-west rows turned on to the west while turned off to the east, then three rows turned off to the west while on to the east, in a repeating zebra pattern. He pushed a few more keys and the rows took off, this time heading the same direction on both sides until, a few more key-punches, and the ones to the left reversed direction. "You get the idea: I'll be here late tonight and probably all day tomorrow programming other sorts of ideas. It's the same each time out with these light pieces of mine: each time it's like a brand-new instrument. First I have to design the thing, then to build it, then to tune it, and then to compose on it, and finally to really play it.

Fig. 15



"But it's likewise always the same: The point is, I am not interested in making objects, I am interested in revealing and reveling in systems and processes. When I lecture, I sometimes cite the work I first encountered in school that has perhaps proved the biggest influence on my own work: Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha*. He created several iterations of the piece, but they all consist of a seated Buddha sculpture gazing at a TV monitor above which a video camera trains its gaze back upon the Buddha's face, such that the image on the monitor's screen, the object of the Buddha's serene contemplation, is his own face. Here, I'll show you." Redl returned to his laptop, sat down before it and switched screens, Googling up "Paik 'TV Buddha' [Fig. 15] Images," and zeroing in on a specific photograph from the proffered array, with the seated Buddha to the left and the monitor and mounted camera to the right, the Buddha's face indeed on the monitor.

It was a momentarily funny effect, the Buddha looking intently into his monitor, and perpendicularly, Redl for his own part looking deep into his own laptop screen. North South East West. Om.

"But the point is"—Redl roused himself from his brief reverie—"and this is what Paik taught me, *it's not about the objects*. The Buddha by itself is nothing, as is the monitor. It's the *interaction* between them that makes the piece. Without that interaction, the entire piece evaporates."

Fig. 16

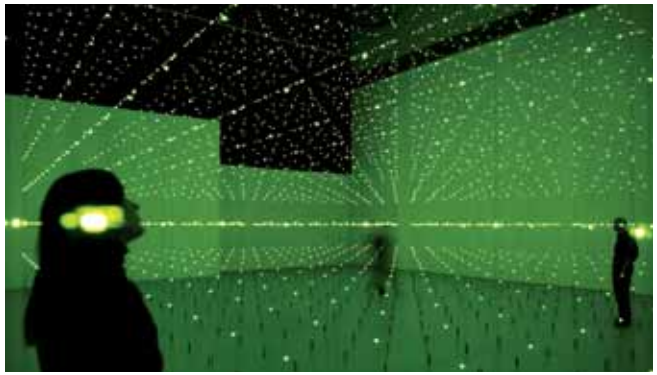


Fig. 17

I asked Redl if he could show me some of his own earlier pieces, and he typed in the coordinates of his quite well-tended website (www.paramedia.net). There were darkened rooms in which the visitor was invited to sit on the floor, Buddha-like, gazing on a grid of tiny red pixels evenly widespread across the facing wall (*Fade—Munich*, 2004; Fig. 16); other such rooms in which tiny green LEDs somehow promulgated the uncanny effect of green dots hovering all about the space, suspended in dark midair (*Matrix II*, 2000/2005; Fig. 17). There were installations combining visual and audio effects, in which lights seemed to race all about the perimeter of a gallery space, the faster the speed, the higher the accompanying pitch, and then back down again, and back up (*Speed Shift*, 2007; Fig. 18). There were enlarged variations on those early old digital clock faces, two vertical rectangles side by side, each bisected by a horizontal slash, only in this instance the sides were made up of narrow planks of wood projected

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

out from the wall with changing-colored LED bands embedded behind the planks casting their lush hues onto the wall behind (*Reflections*, 2016; Fig. 19). There were tall darkened spaces from the ceilings of which Redl had suspended fast-slicing pendulums with light cones at their bottom tips casting fast-moving widening and narrowing elliptical puddles of light across their floors, and any tarrying visitors, in otherwise hushed silence (*Silent Swing*, 2015; Fig. 20), except, that is, in the case of one iteration of the effect, in Montforthaus, Austria, where the sounds of a live performance of the Baroque composer Heinrich Biber's "Rosary Sonatas" were being piped in from a neighboring cathedral (also 2015). There was an entire city—Spartanburg, South Carolina—where, thanks to a winning proposal to the Public Art Challenge

Fig. 20

fund of Bloomberg Philanthropies, Redl was brought in to help marshal the citizenry into inspired acts of collaborative public witness and pleasure (2016).

But two of the most immediately pertinent prior instances, at least in terms of the current project there in Madison Square Park, had occurred nearer Redl's home digs back in Ohio. In one, back in 2013, Redl had activated the hitherto invisible energy encased within an enclosed outdoor oval glass pavilion at the heart of the Toledo Museum of Art by suspending a grid of more than 350 hand-blown glass spheres, half filled with a red liquid, a bit over a foot above the pavilion's floor. Subtly affected by the mild breezes wafting about the enclosed pavilion, the glass balls bobbed and wove, their interior red liquid sloshing from side to side, the entire hushed spectacle observed from behind the infinitely reflecting glass walls by the passing museum visitors within (*Floating in Silence*; Fig. 21). In the other, one of Redl's most ambitious efforts to date, the artist attempted to overmaster the idiosyncratic exterior of architect Peter Eisenman's museum design at the Wexner Center for the Arts, at Ohio State University in Columbus, a long projecting sequence of empty cubes shooting diagonally upward into space, by channeling a sort of composite of Albers, Flavin, and Muybridge, inserting one separate variously colored LED light-tube into each of the cubes, each tube angled slightly differently, so that when the sequence of bulbs went off one after the next, especially late at night, the entire hypnotic installation justified its title, *Fetch* (2010; Fig. 22) as in the tumbling stick after which a dog might be sent chasing.

Fig. 21

Fig. 22

"Originally, I'd proposed an even more gargantuan version of that Wexner piece for here at Madison Square Park," Redl now averred, "with two upside-down catenary curves launching out diagonally, perpendicularly, from tall temporary towers at each corner of the park and converging near the center of the oval before arcing back up toward the other corner, with the seemingly tumbling light shafts mounted within the catenary cage likewise converging there on the middle of the oval and then racing past" (Fig. 23). (Talk about playing fetch in a park.) "That one was deemed a bit too megalomaniacal, as were two variations on the theme, the same effect marshaled at ground level with little upside-down-U-shaped bridges rising up and over the various transverse walking paths, or else two self-contained circular carousels of tumbling light shafts independently mounted on stilts at opposite ends of the park. Eventually, though, I came back down to earth, as it were, and recalling that Toledo piece, I proposed the carpet of lights you see taking shape right now, though with the Wexner twist of allowing the hive of lights to play out all sorts of on-off temporal variations." Redl paused for a moment, tinkering with his laptop and revving up the nine hundred individual lightbulbs once again, getting set for his evening of further programming, before muttering, "Such that this version is my honest attempt at humbleness"—at which point he broke into a broad smile—"albeit on my own slightly somewhat off-humble scale."

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Whiteout's brisk Opening Night, November 16, wasn't especially humble—the light grids were pumping out their ornate visual patterns with proud and vivid authority—

Fig. 23

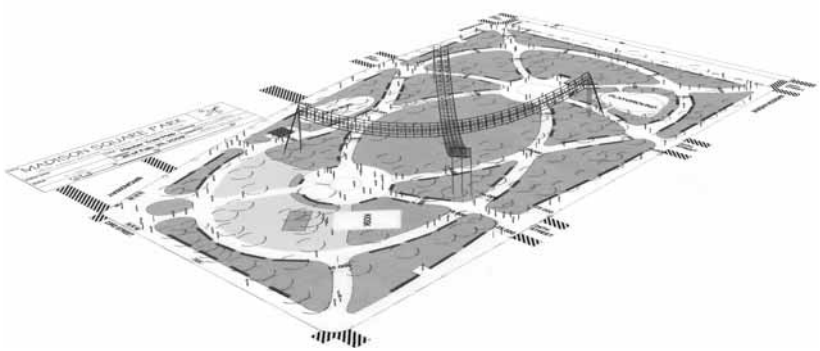

Fig. 24

but it was definitely *gemütlich* (another of my Viennese grandfather's favorite words, and an *echt*-Viennese one at that). The good folks at the Park Conservancy had lain in an ample supply of warm mulled wine, and the guests were ambling about, gloved hands round steaming aromatic cups, taking it all in. As was I.

Indeed, this was the first time I'd been able to gaze upon the installation at night, and the effect was magical. For one thing, while the individual lights were sparkling, I noticed that the rows of bulbs cast veritable bands of light, uninterrupted, upon the ground, which in turn moved in tight formation as the digital program played out its clever variations. Furthermore, the diagonal rows

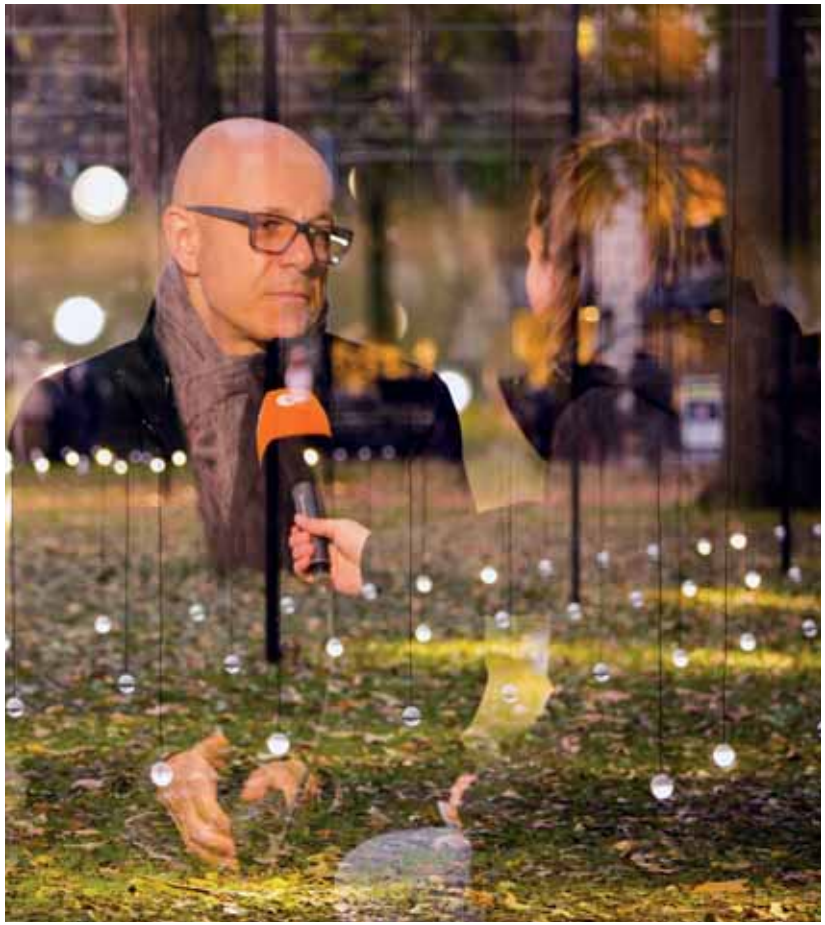

Fig. 25

mysteriously seemed to stutter-stagger in their own secret formations, aslant the wider program. Waves of light bands sloshed and slammed in vivid silent counterpoint, broadening, narrowing, hurrying, tarrying, in splendidly orchestrated sequences.

A visual object, it occurred to me, that your eyes could listen to.

("Wait till you see them in the snow in a few weeks," Redl whispered to me at one point, "the moving puddles of light reflecting back onto the bare tree limbs and into the sky.")

But perhaps the most intriguing effect occurred during intervals when all the lights were on, and if you happened

to be on the north end of the oval, gazing south, as I was at one such point, you'd notice how the long rows of lightbulbs were hardly maintaining anything remotely resembling ruler straightness. Rather, every wisp of a breeze seemed to unsettle the alignments, individual bulbs falling out of line to the left or the right and swaying, tentatively, almost achingly. I was reminded of French cineaste Robert Bresson's sage advice to "translate the invisible wind by the water it sculpts in passing."

A few minutes later I caught up with Redl, surrounded by well-wishers, several of whom seemed to have flown in from Austria. After a while I peeled him away tocongratulate him personally: the piece seemed to be being very well received, and he too seemed pleased. A bit exhausted but pleased.

What about the swaying lightbulbs, I asked him, though. Did they bother him?

"Absolutely not," he replied. "If you'll recall, that sway, that dance within the dance, was the whole point of the original Toledo piece: to register such otherwise invisible forces. It's funny: earlier today a journalist was asking me a variation on that query, wondering whether, if I had my choice,

Fig. 26

Fig. 27

I'd prefer a good stiff grid or this swaying variation. And I answered emphatically the latter. I then brought up the counterexample of so called food porn, those incredibly worked-over photos of supposedly sumptuous repasts, which I find even visually inedible." That in turn reminded me, as I now told him, of a wonderful old essay of Rebecca Solnit's where she had likened the images in Sierra Club calendars to those in *Playboy* calendars, deeming the subtexts in both cases to be identical: Go away, pathetic onlooker, get lost, you are not worthy of such perfection. "Exactly," Redl responded. "After one's taken every effort to render the grid to perfection, you want things to start sliding away, moving about on their own, unexpectedly, imperfectly. That means they're alive!"

A few moments later, I'd broken free of the milling crowd, making my way to the far south curve of the oval, where I stood for a while, warming my hands around another cup of mulled wine, gazing out over the entire piece—the varying banks of lights had run through another of their programs and the interval had returned: the two swaths of lights stretching up into the distance, individual bulbs swaying slightly, quivering, amidst the towering columnar trees. And suddenly it came to me, what the whole installation really reminded me of: the long central nave of a cathedral, with its rows of side pews stretching out to either side, the heads of the seated parishioners, hushed and nodding.

Lawrence Weschler
Writer, academic, and journalist