

The map is not the territory



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photography Courtesy Pablo Valbuena

Quadratura, a site specific video projection on architecture by Pablo Valbuena, enchants us with a new form of video/lighting artistry that somehow merges the virtual space of video art with that of our tangible reality...

Spaces and experiences that challenge the status quo, those capable of redefining our perceptions of the truth, are some of the most fascinating examples of modern art produced today.

The type of work I am talking about exists at the intersection of art, design, architecture and philosophy, and walks the fine line between the world of the virtual and the actual. In these spaces the viewer's mind becomes instrumental in closing the gap between these two worlds.

In his work *Quadratura*, the young Spanish visual artist, Pablo Valbuena, has enacted all of these sensibilities. Born in Madrid in 1978, Valbuena studied architecture at La Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, from which he graduated in 2003. After that, he worked in digital media designing virtual architecture for video games, before commencing this stunning art project.

"My evolution from architecture was quite an organic process," says Valbuena. "I was always interested in subjects closer to art. I work mainly with installations concerned with investigating space and perception." He continues, "I never practiced architecture, but, without doubt, my training adds weight in everything I do."

Valbuena's work utilises light and projection, with position-tracking and stereoscopic (three-dimensional) digital video, to create simulated worlds that extend, augment or disrupt the physical environment of existing spaces. His projections create a virtual layer, another skin, that is projected onto a physical base that already exists. These projections focus on the temporal quality of space, investigating it not only as a three-dimensional environment, but a transformative one, creating tension between the virtual and the physical worlds we inhabit today.

In 2007, Valbuena commenced his *Augmented Sculpture* series of works at Medialab-Prado in Madrid. Approaching sculpture as volume in continuous transformation rather than static mass, these works bring cinematic qualities to three-dimensional sculpture screens. "This kind of installation I usually do inside – in controlled spaces like galleries or museums. On the other hand, there's my line of work on an even bigger scale, which carries the same idea, but in public spaces," says Valbuena. He used Plaza de las Letras for example, a patio at the exterior of Medialab, as a canvas for his public art series.

Although highly contemporary, Valbuena's work flirts with Baroque trompe l'oeil effects. This style flourished in Europe from the Renaissance onward, where trompe artists toyed with the spectators' perspectives to raise questions about the nature of art and perception. Valbuena's transformations of space are achieved through movement, light and shadow. Instead of building architecture with physical materials, his projection of lines and planes of light create illusions of new spaces, redrawn and expanded. The light creates a frame to steer viewers' eyes and show them what is important. The result is a play between light and shadow, matter and vacuum, virtuality and reality.

"Light, for me, is a fundamental way of working," he says. "It interests me a lot, from the point of view of the phenomenology of perception – how we relate to our surroundings. And, on the other hand, I'm interested in working with light as if it is a physical material. When we perceive something, we don't perceive the object, we actually perceive something that is in between – the light."

The core idea is to be working within the observer's head, destabilising their mechanisms of perception. "I like to think that I do not work in space, but in the mind of the beholder," says Valbuena. The artist's work is not objective but very subjective, and is always intended to be so. Like most art, it does not exist without an observer to experience it, but in this case this factor is the most valued component.

There is a connection here to the work of Alford Korzybski, the Polish-American scientist, philosopher and author of *Science and Sanity* (1973). In this book, Korzybski famously stated that "the map is not the territory". This statement encapsulates Korzybski's view that an abstraction derived from something, or a reaction to it, is not the thing itself. Korzybski held that many people confuse maps with territories – that is, confuse models of reality with reality itself. What this means is that our perception of reality is not reality itself, but our own version of it, or our 'map'.

In this respect, the questions surrounding Korzybski's work clearly resonate in Pablo Valbuena's *Extension Series*. "I am interested in questioning the way we perceive space, and if it sends us signals that are true or depend upon our subjectivity. Therefore, I propose doubts rather than certainties, and a warning that what we call real is a construction," says Valbuena.

Extension Series projects a virtual space onto the actual space. The projection scans the space with laser precision, but, while scanning it, it slowly starts redrawing the walls, the windows, the skirting, the floor and the floorboards. Scanning becomes copying; one image turns into two, and in turn, it virtualises what is real and actualises what is virtual. The result is a projected space – a visible space, based on the tangible space, where the existing space and a new thought form a new reality together.

Since 2008, Valbuena has created public art installations of different scales in Europe, Latin America and Asia. He is currently preparing several specific pieces for museums in New York and Tampa (Florida), as well as public art interventions in Japan and Belgium.

"I'm interested in diluting this virtual space, or this physical space," says Valbuena. "What is light? What is really just projected? What is really there without the projection? What is the projection? And I think that, in that sense, these pieces, what they do is generate spaces. The idea is to generate light through spaces that don't exist." (*inside*)

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Pablo Valbuena's *Quadratura*
– site-specific installation,
Matadero Madrid, 2010.
Video projection on architecture.

