

THE ALHAMBRA PROJECT

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*The large picture houses in Berlin are palaces of distraction;
to call them movie theaters (Kinos) would be disrespectful.*

Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction:
On Berlin's Picture Palaces," 1926

The heyday of old movie palaces of the type of San Francisco's Moorish-revival style Alhambra Theater (Miller and Pflueger, 1926) ended with the coming of sound to motion pictures in the late 1920s. The introduction of the talkies led to a new building boom of theaters outfitted with sound equipment. Before this, films were only one part of elaborate multi-media programs that encompassed the entire space of the theater and included live music, dance performances, and the self-display of the patrons themselves. Movie palaces of the 1920s were multi-sensory multi-media adult fantasy environments where consumers were invited to imagine access to the wealth of physical luxuries available, in the past, only to kings, queens, and the aristocracy. Visitors were invited to see and be seen; to perform new kinds of consumption-driven identities: "The patron would be impressed, flabbergasted by the monumentality and luxury of the palace, moving through a real, tangible, and in this sense 'consumable,' environment. The body, movements, and sensations were of central importance." [1] The corporeal and performative nature of the movie palace experience set it apart from later film-going.

In Lynn Marie Kirby and Christoph Steger's one-day 2016 multi-media extravaganza, *The Alhambra Project*, this kind of exhibition and reception fluidity was re-performed and updated in a decidedly digital, computer-art-based context. The event took place one fall evening at the site of the old Alhambra Theatre, now re-purposed as a gym. The Alhambra ceased operation as a movie theater in 1998, and was later converted to a gym by the Crunch Fitness corporation; the conversion retained most of the theater's interior detail, including the large ceiling medallion, the encrusted wall-mirrors, and the old movie screen. Cardio machines now face the screen and films are still shown, if only for gym members.

On September 30th, 2016, after months of planning and preparation, Kirby and Steger invited the public into the Alhambra to experience an event that looked backward to the pasts of the theater in complex and evocative ways: back to the Moorish architectural revival style that, in California, replaced the Mission revival style and looked back beyond Mexico to Spain. The project looked back to the Islamic sacred-art underpinnings of both the Moorish revival style and of contemporary computer-based art. It also looked back to previous eras, still held in the living memories of its residents, of the ever-changing Russian Hill neighborhood where the Alhambra Theater is situated at 2330 Polk Street. The event was enriched and enlivened by contributions from collaborating artists from around the world: Etel Adnan, Omar Mismar, Binta Ayofemi, Pearl Marill, Emma Manion, and Elaine Buckholtz.

While the old movie palace experience was not exclusively defined by the narrative aspects of film exhibition (the 'story' of the film), the analogue projection of silent films – the stream of light onto the screen and the clatter of the mechanism – was certainly part of the corporeal experience of the theater. Kirby and Steger organized their event around many forms of relationship between the bodies of visitors and screen interfaces. The space around the large main screen in the theater was transformed into a dance floor where the public was invited to imitate exercise movements choreographed by dancer Pearl Marill and led by Emma Manion. These exercises reproduced movement-snippets taken from films screened at the Alhambra over its 60+ year-long-history as a movie theater. Each movement was transformed into a gif and described in an intertitle ("move hands reveal face"; "move our arms"; etc), accompanied by dramatic appropriated film music, and the whole loop of gifs was repeated every 15 or 20 minutes, so a new group of visitors could participate. Other uses of screens involved the creation of a mobile-app tour for personal cell-phone use outside in the environs of the theater and, lastly, taking over the gym's video monitors to present a cycle of 6 video works. Among these works were tours of the interior and exterior of the original Alhambra; footage of pets from the Russian Hill neighborhood; excerpts from an email conversation between Kirby and Etel Adnan; animated photographs of bodybuilders working out in the ruins of an unspecified city by Omar Mismar; and a video of a waterfall by Binta Ayofemi.

A theme of water ran through many of the videos, especially the tours of the Alhambra, the conversations between Kirby and Adnan, and this last waterfall video. Certainly, and almost subliminally, the movement of water and the cascading of images one imagines in the old Alhambra theatre, in the current Alhambra's use as a gym, and in the one-night event of *The Alhambra Project* strike a resonant chord. For anyone who has visited the Alhambra palaces in Granada, Spain, the sounds of cool water flowing from the nearby Sierra Nevada Mountains and coursing through channels, fountains, and complex hydraulic systems to irrigate the gardens around the palaces; the movement of water that fills the many interior and exterior reflecting pools and provides a renewable refuge from often blistering heat: these sounds are overwhelmingly a primary acoustic take-away. In her video tours of the Alhambra palaces, Kirby sometimes aptly centered water-sounds as pure soundscape. On the gym monitors, sounds and images of water were often privileged, and this watery presence fully and almost uncannily reactivated, for knowing visitors, the original Alhambra experience.

If movie palaces before talkies were distinctive in that the total corporeal and performative experience of these spaces was set apart from later modes of film reception, Laura U. Marks' writings on Islamic philosophy and new media art suggest related points of connection between Islamic art, older modes of media reception in the West, and contemporary computer-based art of the type underlying *The Alhambra Project*.^[2] Kirby interviewed Marks for the project, and excerpts from this interview were incorporated into the third type of screen interface created for the event: the mobile app tour of the Russian Hill neighborhood around the Alhambra theater. In her interview, Marks notes: "All religions require some kinds of performative acts" and "Islamic art – because of the prohibition against images – has this aspect of performativity." In her longer study, *Enfoldment and Infinity*, Marks observes that "Islamic Art invites a kind of attention that is embodied, subjective, and performative. The body is important...not as something to be represented, but as a medium of reception" (62). The Islamic concept of embodied subjective perception, where a

“multisensory aesthetics” refers to “the participation of fragrances, gustatory delicacies, fountains, music, and visual splendor,” implies – according to Marks – a “somewhat dispersed subjectivity” (62).

This kind of “dispersed subjectivity” can be an important pre-disposition to various states of expanded awareness and aesthetic and religious sensitivity. The suggestion has been made that it underlies the reception of contemporary interactive art as well. According to Arjen Mulder, interactive art may be “valueless” in itself, but it “opens you up, rearranges you, helps you on your way, causes you to flow and divide.”[3] Kirby’s projects have always stressed the importance of multi-sensory experience, and have used what is often narrowly conceived as primarily ‘visual’ media – video, film, performance, digital arts – to stage expanded experiences that involve all the senses. Several of her projects are framed around hearing and listening: *The 24th Street Listening Project* (2012); *Roomtone* (2015); and others. Her recent Venice para-Biennale intervention at Campo Madonna De l’Orto, *To Hold To Miss To Remember* (2017), was framed around the proximate sense of smell: around sitting with strangers in a shared olfactory space where memory, kinship, and affect might be released and circulated. Facilitating or activating a “dispersed subjectivity” and an experience that “opens you up, rearranges you, helps you on your way, causes you to flow and divide” have been at the heart of Kirby’s body of work for many years.

According to Marks, unlike the forms of aniconism peculiar to Islamic art, computer-based art is often “less responsive to the nuances of subjectivity, for it reduces our spectrum of engagement to a few variables” (62). Such a reduction of variables does not apply, exactly, in the case of Steger and Kirby’s *Alhambra Project*, since it was staged in large part in real time and real space, and since it activated a kind of “performativity” that film historians attribute specifically to movie palaces of the 1920s. Marks makes comparisons between the aniconic and algorithmic underpinnings of new media art and Islamic art with careful attention to both their similarities and their differences. Islamic art is material and sensuous and invites embodied engagement: “This is what it has in common with the Western modern art that in part it inspired. New media art is trying to restore a sense of the body to its dry spaces of calculation...but it remains a challenge” (65).

Marks suggests that “an Islamic approach” to new media art might “help us to think about how new media could cultivate subjective but impersonal attitudes... It might also help us think about which virtualities are really worth struggling for” (65). *The Alhambra Project* took up this challenge to find and to maximize an “Islamic approach” to new media art that might foster new attitudes, new communities, and new subject-positions; and that might also honor and value those of the past. Ultimately, Marks argues that Islamic art, like computer-based art, works by unfolding-enfolding principles that are importantly about communication, performativity, access to the invisible, and creating social interaction. In Islam, the aim is to generate social networks, along with attitudes of reverence toward the invisible, the infinite, Allah, God. Steger and Kirby’s project generated decidedly secular -- but nonetheless movingly (and whimsically) felt -- networks of connection between the participants and the site of the performance-event. Through maps of the neighborhood, through the mobile phone app, and simply by bringing people together in and around the theater, Steger and Kirby linked participants to businesses, residents, visitors to the neighborhood, and to each other.

Arriving the evening of the Alhambra event, we – my friends and I – spent the evening first trying out (or just watching) the choreographed exercises. Then we checked out the monitors, and were at first somewhat mystified by images of male bodies posing and flexing amid debris in an apparently devastated city. We tried to make sense of the virtual – but cut-up – tour of the ‘real’ Alhambra. Then we sought refuge in a quiet eddy off to the side where a monitor ran text from an email exchange between Kirby and Lebanese-French artist Etel Adnan -- mainly concerning the waters of the Alhambra. The text was superimposed on, or alternated with, color fields of blue. Then we followed the maps on handouts that directed us toward various neighborhood businesses that had been recruited to participate in the project. We were intrigued by the idea of a local hair salon (Backstage Hair Salon) that was hosting a display of large-scale images: a “Wallpaper Pattern Exhibition.” But when we reached the salon door, it was locked tight with a steel security gate. They’d closed early. So we strolled back up the street to a participating wine-bar (William Cross Wine Bar) that was offering free tastes of a Spanish Cava along with cheese and crackers. While there, we spontaneously struck up a conversation with another local artist, who invited us to her own event a few weeks away. New connections to the city and its residents were generated – and we did in fact eventually attend this other future event, outdoors in the Presidio – where a new network, and a new space in the city, unfolded for us.

After the wine bar, we tried out the mobile app walking tour, but by then it was too dark and too cold to venture further, so we saved it for another day. While Steger and Kirby’s event was light-hearted and fun (a Kirby trade-mark), it also partook of some serious, if lightly held, pedagogical aims that sunk in and gained traction and depth over time. We learned something about the Alhambra (the movie palace and the Moorish-Christian palaces); we learned about an underlying set of connections between California and Spain; and we learned something deeper about connections between Islamic art and computer-based performative ‘event’ art. We also learned about the neighborhood and some of the people who live there. New social networks unfolded, and existing ones were reinforced, with an overall feeling I can only describe as certainly “embodied”; also “performative”; but, as well, kindly, playful, loving, and community-building: an ethical feeling, in other words, that I associate with the sacred, however we define it.

Essay commissioned by Lynn Marie Kirby and Christoph Steger on the occasion of the launch of *The Alhambra Project*.

[1] Maria A. Slowinska, “Consuming Illusion, Illusions of Consumability: American Movie Palaces of the 1920s” in *Amerikastudien/American Studies* Vol. 50, No. 4, 2005. p.598

[2] See especially Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Cambridge Mass: The MIT Press, 2010.

[3] Arjen Mulder, “The Exercise of Interactive Art” in *Interact or Die!* Ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam V@, 2007, 56. Quoted in Marks, 65.