

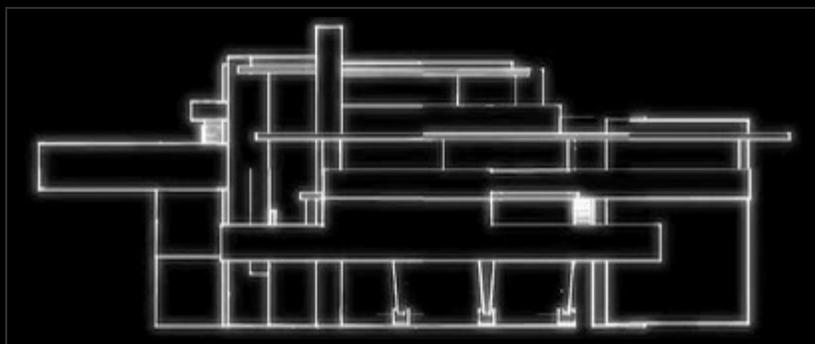
# THE PITTSBURGH ART BLOG

FOR 4 YEARS THE PITTSBURGH ART BLOG PROMOTED ARTISTS AND ART EVENTS. THE BLOG WILL CHANGE NAMES SOON AND FOCUS ON CULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE REGION, INCLUDING VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS, LOCAVORE AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS. IT WILL FEATURE ORIGINAL ARTICLES WRITTEN BY MANY DIFFERENT CONTRIBUTORS.

## Submitting Info

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2011

## An Original Feature: Multimedia Works from Luftwerk



### Magical Multimedia Works from Luftwerk

A Chicago art team is transforming an iconic masterpiece of American architecture using a “new medium of expression.”

By [Angela Shawn-Chi Lu](#)

Spectacles of light and form, they provoke the question: “What is that?”

In one, clouds amidst a cerulean sky soar across a 10-ton wall of shimmering ice. In another, waves and water reflections flood a canopy of 13,000 silk lotus flowers. In a third, sophisticated kaleidoscopes twist and twirl vertiginously.



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Featured everywhere from Abu Dhabi to Massachusetts, the video projection installations of the art team called Luftwerk, mesmerize. Upon witnessing one of Luftwerk's projects last fall, Eva Silverman, a director at the Chicago Office of Tourism and Culture, recalls letting out a gasp and thinking, "That's so exciting."

However, none of that previous work can quite compare to what the Chicago-based pair, husband Sean Gallero and wife Petra Bachmaier, are creating now—a tribute to one of the greatest architectural masterpieces of all time. This January, trustees of Fallingwater—the terraced, rural Pennsylvania house that many consider to be Frank Lloyd Wright's tour de force—approached Luftwerk to create a video projection show for its exterior. After eight and a half months of hard work, their project comes to life this weekend at a gala on Saturday night and a showing on Sunday night in Mill Run, Pa. for the 75th anniversary of the iconic residence. Footage of the show will also be viewable on YouTube soon.

Fallingwater trustees recognize that the team produces some of today's most progressive contemporary art—works, however, that remain a mystery to many. Using design software, lighting and video projection, Luftwerk crafts multisensory immersive installations, sculptures and shows that engage viewers visually, aurally and tactilely. Ultimately, the team hopes to sensitize viewers within the media-saturated culture of distraction, and encourage viewers to reexamine the world.

The Fallingwater project, though, has become one of Luftwerk's most difficult challenges to date, both on technical and conceptual levels. The team must tailor their projectors and designs to fit the various depths of Fallingwater's cantilevered terraces without overlapping or pixilation, and they must do this in the middle of a wooded glen broken by a waterfall, while still honoring the gorgeous architecture that dominates the space.

Luftwerk is now setting out to accomplish what even renowned installation artist Robert Irwin considered mind-bogglingly difficult. While visiting Fallingwater during the 1980s to consider building an installation there, Irwin, according to Fallingwater Director Lynda Waggoner, simply said, "Well, I don't know what else I can say. The dialogue here is so complete."

Bachmaier and Gallero hope to keep the conversation going, though they recognize the complexities involved.

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“I think the greatest challenge is: How do you create something on a creation that’s so iconic?” Gallero says.

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Hard, geometric shapes. Massive, white drafting tables. Cushionless chairs and stools for working. If an architect wanted a de Stijl-inspired office, this would be it. Though large by city standards, Luftwerk’s Humboldt Park studio, which doubles as the couple’s apartment, is almost entirely devoted to their craft. Only the two tiny bedrooms at the front offer space for any relaxation.

The apartment’s furnishings reflect the duo’s intense discipline. They are now working up to 15 hours a day, seven days a week for the Fallingwater project.

“It’s a 24/7 process,” says Gallero, 38, a slender, Filipino-American with large circular eyes. “There’s no out. So even in the middle of the night. We might think ‘What do you think of this? Or what if we did that?’”

But they wouldn’t have it any other way.

“I love that we live where we work,” says Bachmaier, 36, a petite German with a dark brown pixie cut. “I’m not looking for a separation of those two.”

This is how their serene installations and gentle demeanors deceive. Although their art pieces and whispery voices tend to lull the viewer and listener into deep repose, they live to work extremely hard. Professionalism seems to permeate every aspect of their lives. For instance, Bachmaier and Gallero refer to themselves as “partners.” In their case, they are literal partners, having collaborated as an art team over the last 11 years.

“I would say she’s my partner first and foremost, because that’s how we connect and that’s how we stay connected,” Gallero says. “I think that is the hierarchy that we have here—partner in creative crime rather than spouse.”

It’s a partnership that they have patiently honed over the years after meeting as students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1999. Bachmaier was deconstructing a phonograph player for a Dada-esque solo performance, but Gallero’s roommate accidentally

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broke it. Having grown up tinkering with electronics, Gallero was able to get the machine back to decent shape.

“I was throwing a monkey wrench into that whole gear system with me coming on board and being in her life,” Gallero says. “I had to say, ‘You can trust me,’ and she had to open up a bit as well.”

He was immediately intrigued by Bachmaier’s work, however. Fascinated by odd vinyl records of animal noises and foreign language lessons, Bachmaier was transforming herself into a multi-armed phonographic creature who would manually play records with a gramophone speaker on her head.

During the next year, 2000, Gallero visited Bachmaier in her native Germany. Their relationship developed and they married in Chicago. Later, as an art team, they started calling themselves Luftwerk (pronounced “looft wurk”) to brand themselves with something memorable. “Luft” is German for air. Bachmaier believes light, a predominant medium in their work, resembles air. “Werk” is German for work, workplace or a studio.

They received their first commission for a private event in 2003 for “Skywall,” a 10-ton wall of ice blocks with video projections of clouds. In 2009 they became full-time artists and now make a living off two to three large commissions each year. Their projects have included everything from an interactive camping trip video customized for autistic children to an advertisement installation for the Japanese retail chain Muji on monitors inside New York City’s Kennedy International Airport.

Last year, they were selected as featured artists for Chicago Artists Month, an annual event hosted by the Chicago Office of Tourism and Culture, for their installation at the centennial celebration of another Frank Lloyd Wright residence, the Frederick C. Robie House, in Hyde Park. Despite their success, Bachmaier and Gallero know a long-term collaboration isn’t easy.

“Artists are solitary figures with ego, and to work with another artist is a pretty big undertaking, and to do it successfully, that’s unbelievable,” Gallero says.

“We’re both stubborn,” Bachmaier admits. “It’s over time, we learned how to work with each other.”

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Today, they've got their respective roles down solid—he's the tech expert and she's the primary conceptualist, although they do switch duties occasionally. Bachmaier typically starts their projects by researching and then sketching basic ideas. Gallero, who is largely self-taught, then brings those ideas to fruition through software programs.

“He has many talents, while I have a tendency to be a single vision person, so it's a good match,” Bachmaier says.

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Last year while planning for Fallingwater's 75th anniversary gala, Fallingwater Director Lynda Waggoner knew she needed something extraordinary to pay tribute to the architectural icon.

“It's difficult to interact with Fallingwater, because Fallingwater interacts so well with its site,” she says. “What more can one say?”

Like Luftwerk, she was well aware of the challenges the site presents for any artist attempting to pay homage. For starters, the performance had to be held outdoors, as the residence (today a National Historic Landmark) could not hold all 300 of the expected guests. But even the outdoor space had limited capacity—not enough room for an orchestra, for example. In any case, live music would get drowned out by the famous waterfall that runs below Fallingwater.

Eventually Waggoner concluded that only one art form could interact with the façade of the building in a refreshing way without possibly damaging it—video projection art, which she refers to as “video mapping.”

“Video mapping has the ability to take the architectural elements of a building and morph the surface of the building into something else,” Waggoner says. “It's a new medium of expression.”

She found Luftwerk through her art world contacts and after meeting the duo in February, decided they had the right sensibility for the project. Luftwerk and Wright, in fact, share many similarities in their work. With his “organic architecture” approach, Wright sought to elevate

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