

Tripping the Light Fantastic

With its highly Instagrammable installations, the creative collective teamLab has been shaking up the art world. Chloe Street meets the brains behind a phenomenon blurring the boundary between art and technology

Have you ever walked into a gallery and found a floating cube of LEDs programmed to shimmer in patterns resembling a fireplace? Or journeyed through a labyrinth of suspended crystals whose glittering patterns you can control via smartphone? Or drawn a fish and scanned it into a computer, only to have it appear seconds later swimming across a vast seabed projection on an adjacent wall? No. Then you probably haven't encountered one of teamLab's ultra-technological, interactive and synaesthetic visual, acoustic (and occasionally olfactory) experiences.

The Japanese art collective was founded in 2001 by physics, mathematics and IT graduate Toshiyuki Inoko, who set out—with fellow University of Tokyo graduates, mainly majors in science and engineering—to “explore art through digital media. I wanted to create a place where people could collaborate and explore across the different fields of science and technology and art,” he says.

Through a clever combination of projectors, motion sensors, LEDs and computers “hooked up to think and communicate with each other,” says Kazumasa Nonaka, a member of the group, teamLab creates large digital artworks that envelop visitors in an audio-visual experience like no other. “There are all

sorts of boundaries in the physical world that can be eliminated through digital art,” says Inoko, explaining how teamLab's installations demand the involvement of the viewer. Unlike traditional art, which in some senses is a one-way conversation, the interactive elements of teamLab creations enable the artwork itself to change in response to the viewer's behaviour.

At a teamLab exhibition in Tokyo last summer, for example, a dark room filled knee-high with water was alive with projections of vibrantly coloured fish swimming through the water. As visitors waded in, the fish responded by swimming around them, the visitors becoming part of the art themselves. When a fish collided with a visitor, it would transform into a flower. “We are very inspired by history and nature,” says Inoko. “People think nature has already been understood by science, but there's a part that has yet to be understood, and we want to explore that through our digital artworks.”

WATERWORKS

TeamLab's Gold Waves was displayed on the facade of Hong Kong's H Queens building in March. The digital work plays in a continuous loop



LIGHT AND SOUND Above: *The Way of Birds—Seated Contemplation*, an interactive digital installation created by teamLab in 2017, on permanent exhibition in Eibo-kan, Fukui, Japan, with sound by Hideaki Takahashi. Below: *Crystal Universe*, an interactive LED installation created by teamLab in 2015, on permanent display at the ArtScience Museum in Singapore



The aesthetic appeal of the vibrant installations has also made for a deluge of “art selfie” images on social media. “The popularity on social media has been overwhelming,” says Nonaka. “I am so impressed by how social media can make people interested in art.” The extent to which Instagram generates ticket sales is hard to determine; however, there can be no doubt that teamLab’s installations are incredibly popular. The team’s recent show at Pace gallery in London sold out, and visitors waited in queues for five hours to get into a Tokyo show last year—“in high summer,” says Nonaka, “That’s crazy.”

The number of visitors to Singapore’s ArtScience Museum “increased by 83 per cent in the second quarter of 2016 following the opening of teamLab’s Future World,” the museum’s executive director, Honor Harger, says. “On the social media front, we also saw a significant increase in the number of positive reviews on Trip Advisor after the launch of the permanent exhibition, and there continues to be a steady linear growth.”

In the early years after founding teamLab, Inoko found it hard to sell its art, so he capitalised on the technological side, selling the systems he developed to keep the cash flowing. The big break didn’t come until contemporary artist Takashi Murakami visited teamLab’s Tokyo base and decided the group’s work was worthy of an exhibition at his gallery in Taipei. Staged in 2011, that show, teamLab’s first, launched the collective into the spotlight, and “it’s been a fast and overwhelming six years” since, says Nonaka. The collective, which now numbers 400 members (designers, engineers, web designers, architects, project managers and technicians who describe themselves as “ultra-technologists”), participated in the 2013 Singapore Biennale and now has two permanent exhibitions in the city—and dozens of other permanent exhibitions as well as temporary displays around the world.

Hong Kong has also drawn the attention of teamLab. In March, it was one of the collaborators in a digital art project, *Voyages*, that saw moving images from a number of different creators shown on a screen measuring 6.5 metres by 8 metres on the facade of the H Queens building on Queen’s Road Central. Presented by Pace Gallery, the teamLab piece, *Gold Waves*, was a spellbinding computer-generated simulation of moving water that stopped passers-by in their tracks. “They go



PAINT IN CODE Toshiyuki Inoko, teamLab’s founder, and team member Kazumasa Nonaka in front of their installation on the facade of the H Queens building in Hong Kong

beyond the boundaries between art, science, technology and creativity through co-creative activities,” says Kristine Li, deputy general manager of Henderson Leasing (the owner of the building) of teamLab’s work.

Would the collective consider creating a permanent installation in Hong Kong? “Of course we would love to,” exclaims Nonaka. “That depends on Hong Kong,” smiles Inoko. “I love Hong Kong. It has become a very important place for art.” Nonaka continues, “We are still at the very beginning and so we hope we will get more opportunities to reach more people internationally.”

TeamLab has big plans—to transform entire metropolises, either by projecting images onto existing cities, or creating entire living spaces from scratch. “The presence of other people in one of our artworks will change it and make it more beautiful than having just you in the room,” says Nonaka. “So we want to extend that idea to a city scale, to encourage people to feel more positive about the presence of others when interacting in a city space.” Inoko emphasises, “We want to make an artwork that’s really huge. It could be artificial like Disneyland or an actual city you can live in.”

In blurring the lines between technology, science and art so spectacularly, teamLab has managed to confuse a few art critics and arguably create a new genre of art, digital magic capable of reaching a wide audience both physically and through social media platforms. This is public art for a generation accustomed to sensory overload and constant digital stimulus. And it’s beautiful. 🍎