

TRONIC STUDIO

by Joe Shepter

I was kept from Tronic's studio more by a cold than by choice, and I wasn't happy. Founded by two former architecture students, the firm is known for transforming ordinary places—lobbies, airport corridors—into unforgettable experiences filled with flowing shapes and 3-D films. I could only imagine what they'd do with their own space.

Vivian Rosenthal, partner in the firm with Jesse Seppi, assures me I'm not missing much. "I don't know what you'd want to see," she says. "It's just desks and computers... People come in and are surprised that it's so quiet. Everyone listens to music on their headphones; it's a very quiet, calm studio."

Say it isn't so. Tronic is easily one of the best firms creating installation or "built environment" advertising. Bridging the gaps between architecture, interactivity, sculpture and film, they have immersed people in branded experiences everywhere from JFK to the Shanghai World's Fair. Their clients include a murderer's row of big spenders like Microsoft, Target, General Electric and Hewlett-Packard.

Then again, as I talked with them, a quiet space began to make sense. Seppi and Rosenthal are soft-spoken and deeply thoughtful. Unlike many creative teams, they aren't a yin and yang with complementary talents that add up to a whole. They are cut from the same cloth: measured, theoretically fluent and absurdly technologically savvy. Their conversations touch on everything from the latest 3-D printing machines to Vitruvius, a first-century Roman who wrote the earliest extant treatise on architecture. (The basic problems haven't changed since his time, Seppi tells me.)

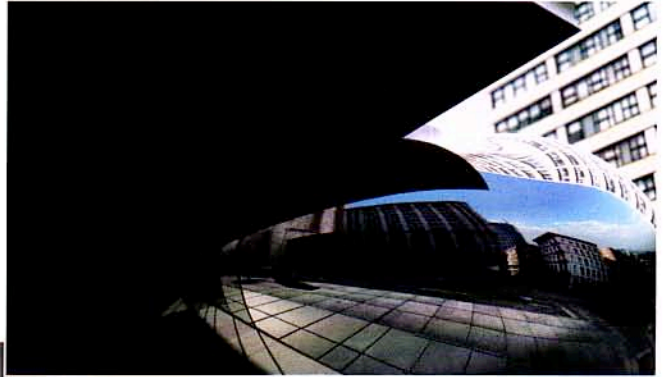
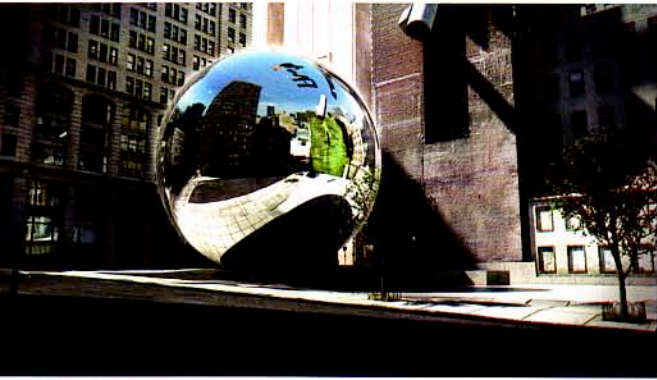
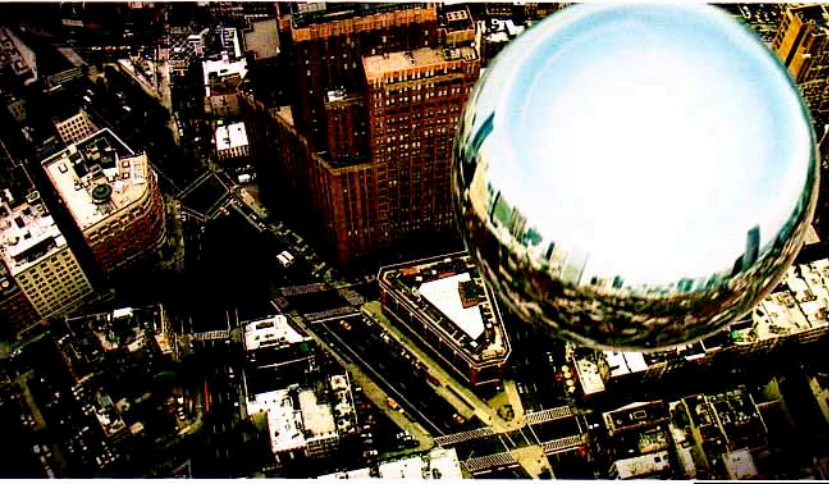
The two met on the first day of graduate school at the Columbia University School of Architecture, and it was creative love almost at first sight. "He was this aloof guy, standing by himself, and I had to go up and talk to him," says Rosenthal.

It turned out that Seppi was an architect who had gone to Ohio State, then a leading school for computer-assisted design, and worked for renowned Santa Monica architect Thom Mayne. Rosenthal had a degree from Brown University and a less structured background that included creating collage poetry by using words clipped from other sources. If that sounds incompatible, you're not ready for Tronic. Like Seppi, Rosenthal had long been obsessed with spaces and how to fill them, even if that included words on a page. They soon found they shared other interests too: robots, cyborgs, anime and, of course, architecture.

They knew they wanted to work together, but unlike most idealists, they were also very practical. So, they made a proposal to the owner of an old factory in Brooklyn: they would redesign and renovate the space, turning it into loft apartments. In exchange, they received

Tronic Studio is the design firm on all projects and supplied the caption information.

Right: "The contents of a 57-story building do an elegant dance against the backdrop of the New York skyline in our unforgettable film **that plays on a spherical HD screen** for Herzog & de Meuron's residential tower in Tribeca." Herzog & de Meuron, client.



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five years of cheap rent and the financial freedom to do whatever it was they would do.

It turned out that this foundation was largely unnecessary. In 2001, the two also collaborated on a joint thesis that caught the eye of one of their advisors, who happened to work for digital agency R/GA. Soon after, they were hired to execute a commercial project for the firm, and Tronic Studio was born. They've been busy ever since.

It's not easy to summarize the work. Rosenthal and Seppi may produce an augmented reality application for an iPhone that streams video according to a GPS location. Or they may create a 3-D film that plays on a spherical HD screen. Or they may transform a huge space into a sculptural installation. Whatever they do, it's almost always original or as near to it as you can get.

"There are a lot of studios that create cool graphics that are trendy and make you feel good," Rosenthal says. "It's like McDonald's—you know what you're going to get, and it's good, but you're not going to remember it. It's a different thing from what we do."

So how do you live in that rarefied air? You might think Seppi and Rosenthal are the ultimate in trendsetters, hanging on the edge of every new twist in the overheated digital graphics marketplace. Maintaining 6 blogs, 2,000 Facebook friends and a running commentary on the latest Zaha Hadid project. Mainlining Gizmodo and Engadget? Nothing could be less true. As they said before: quiet studio, headphones. They practice a "conceptual" approach. No copying, no listening. Simply thought.

"I think as a species human beings are more likely to mimic one another than any other," says Seppi, "Intentionally, or not, so I've stayed away from inundating myself with what's going on."

Instead they look at technology at a basic level. They immerse themselves in experimental interfaces, architectural tools and their own ideas and conversations. They don't begin by thinking about how something should look; they don't even start at the idea-level of a good branding or advertising agency. It's much more fundamental. They look at how to subvert a technology or how to combine different disciplines, like film and sculpture. What would that look like, how could it work? And, most importantly, how can we apply it to a client's needs?

A good example is their Manifold project for technology giant Hewlett-Packard. Though the focus of the project (and much written about it) is the sculpture and video, it actually encompassed a redesign of the lobby in the company's headquarters—



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a technological reimagining of interior design, including everything from paint color and chairs to the sensors embedded in the doors.

Conceptually, their idea was to create a welcoming structure for the company's entrance: a pair of sculptural arms that would spread out across the room and react to people as they walked in the door. The most noticeable elements are the flowing, deconstructed shapes that rotate at breathless speed to display a high-definition video wall.

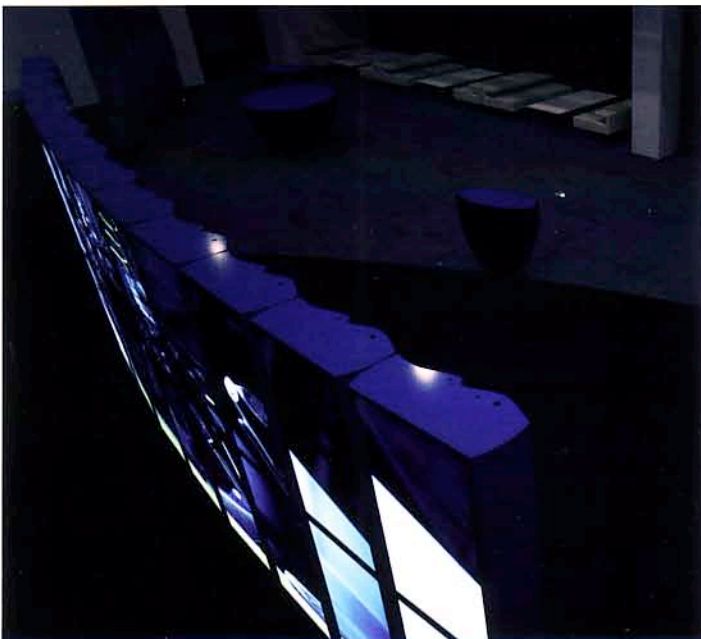
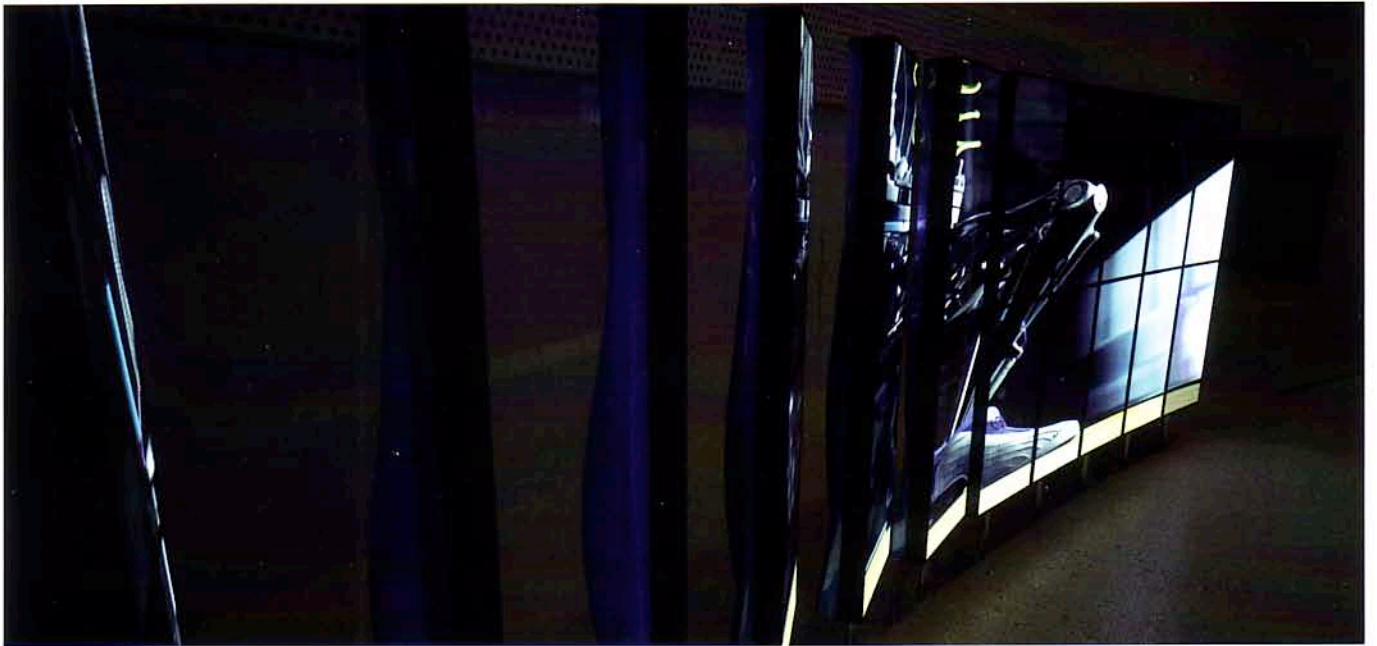
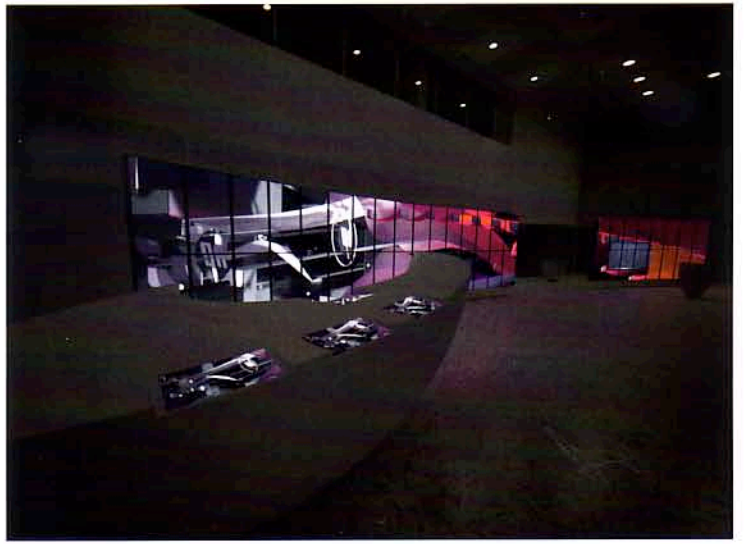
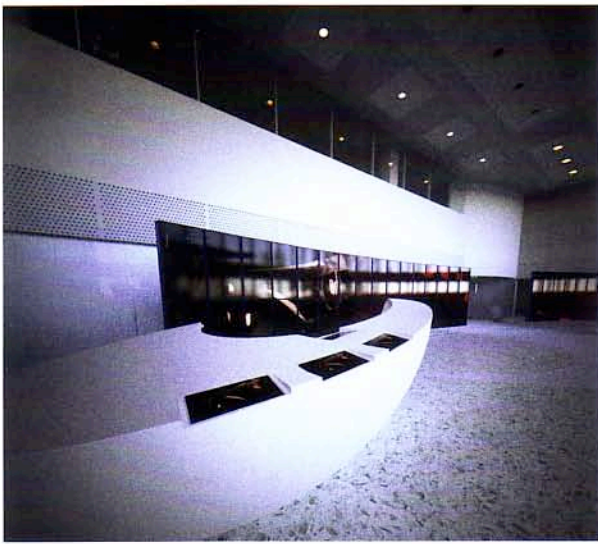
Though beautiful to look at, the forms required a deep understanding of the tools and technologies available today. Initially, Seppi designed them with architectural software. They were then rendered into hard form using a computer numerical control (CNC) milling machine. The form was then covered with fiberglass reinforced plastic (FRP) and painted using a process common to Ferraris and other high-end cars. The end result? A lightweight but durable shell that can move quickly while still holding heavy video screens.

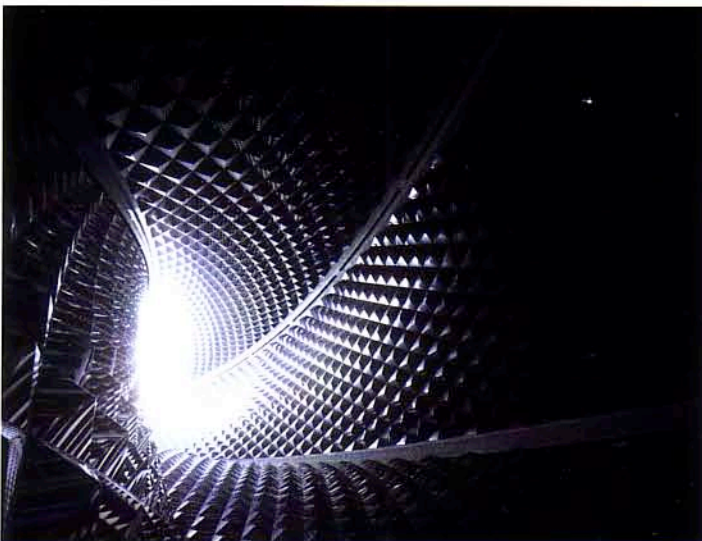
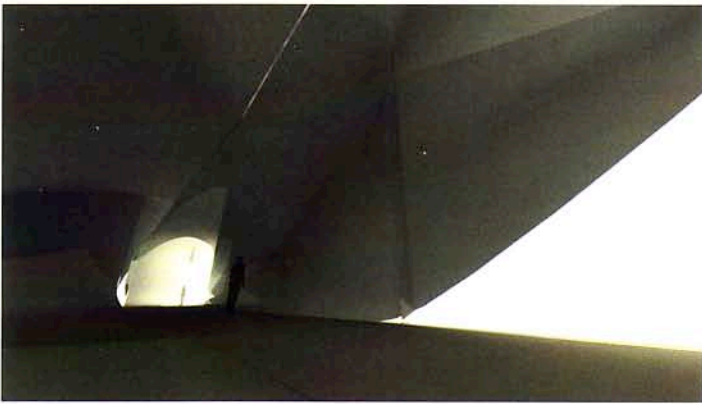
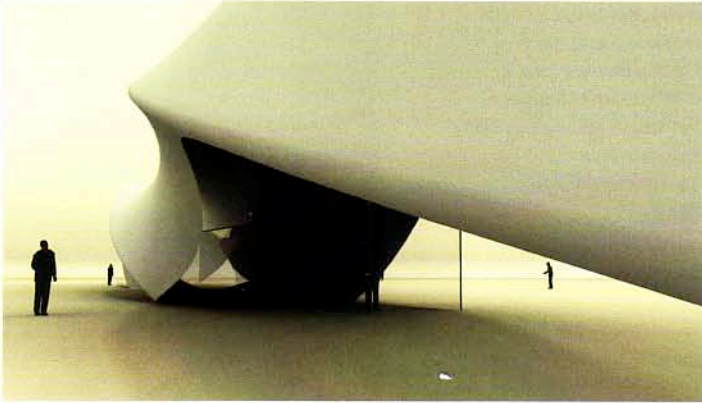
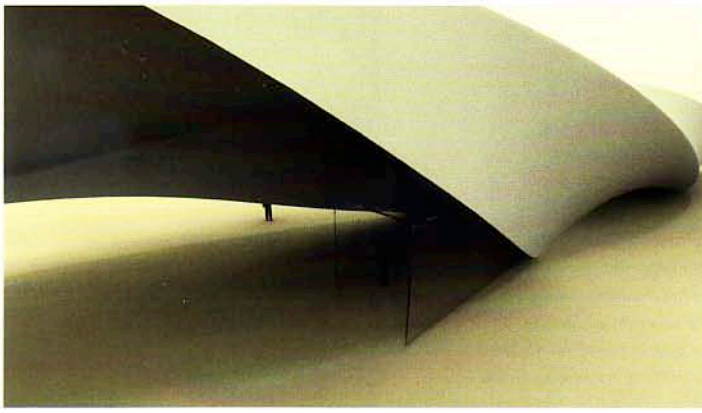
Tronic doesn't only define spaces and create experiences architecturally, they also create 3-D films and work extensively using interfaces based on gestures or locations. A good example is the GE Visible You installation that debuted at the Shanghai World's Fair.

Tronic was commissioned to find a fun way to promote GE's body-scanning technology. The solution was an installation

Right: "A 90-second HD cinematic for Take 2's anticipated **Spec Ops multiplayer game** marked our very first foray into the world of console gaming." Take 2, client.







that allowed users to enter a space and face a screen with an android-like person on it. The android quickly resized to the user's height. From that point on, the user could move about in any way, and the android perfectly mimicked the actions—while displaying muscular, skeletal and other body systems. It was at once surprising, fun and a big hit.

Visible You also exposes the difficulties Tronic and similar firms face to constantly produce things that are surprising and new. In 2002, gestural interfaces belonged to science fiction films like *Minority Report*. In the middle of 2010 came Visible You, which was a popular installation at a technologically-heavy fair. By Christmas of 2010, consumers were able to have—in the form of Xbox Kinect—a far more capable and sophisticated system in their living rooms. The timeframe between overwhelming wow-factor and been-there-done-that gets shorter every day.

Still, Tronic doesn't worry too much about falling behind. If anything, they find their ideas occasionally need to be toned down. "It's interesting to watch people and see what they're ready to accept in terms of advertising and architecture," says Seppi. "Are they ready to accept an image that's not vertical in a wall, rather on the floor? Is that too disturbing... You have to be really aligned with certain social and political structures to understand the timing of when it's appropriate to push forward."

Must be nice to have that problem.

As my cold faded, Tronic was turning to a new project slated for a space in Paris, and I realized I wouldn't have time to visit them in person. I don't completely buy that their studio is ordinary. Then again, if you're constantly making something new, you may not have much time for anything else. **CA**

Left: "Commissioned to create a large-scale sculpture and video installation that 'transcends technology and creates an experience that embraces the new' at **HP's Palo Alto headquarters**, we designed an ever-emerging reality that rides the cutting edge of experiential design expectations." HP, client.

This page: "When **GE** was looking to make an unforgettable visual impact at the 2009 Beijing Olympics, they turned to us—we had already collaborated on several projects—to conceptualize and design their pavilion from the ground up." GE, client.

"One Hundred Plus Zero, a virtual museum concept that would house the Bulgari B.zero1 limited-edition ring by Anish Kapoor."

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This page: "A partnership as strong and groundbreaking as the one between global leader Shell and Formula One dominator Ferrari deserves a tribute like no other. We were approached by Imagination to create five highly polished short films to showcase the distinctive ways that **Shell and Ferrari** work together to remain at the forefront of innovation. Adhering closely to Shell's established brand and Ferrari's critical eye, We fused a seamless blend of CG glass structures, complex fluid sims and three-dimensional illustrations into an unforgettable journey that shows what happens when two of the world's leaders in technology build such an unstoppable allegiance." Tronic Studio, director/animation; Imagination, production company; Shell/Ferrari, clients.

"WCRS approached us to help them evolve Santander's already well-known brand of Lego block structures to the next level. So when WCRS asked for a **massive oak tree made of red blocks** to grow in a busy London square, we knew it was going to be a huge creative and technical challenge. By being heavily involved from preproduction to post-production, we were able to maintain a consistent voice throughout the project that included concept design, direction, editorial, visual effects and finish. The end result is a surprisingly warm and energetic spot that tells a clear story of growth and stability for the Santander brand." Tronic Studio, director/animation; HSI London, production company; WCRS, ad agency; Santander, client.

Right: "As presenting sponsor of the three-day NextFest technology and design event, Hitachi commissioned us—the agency of record for the festival—to design a 6,000-square-foot installation that reflected **Hitachi's role in clean water technology**." Hitachi, client.

"The **Bloom installation for Sharp**—created with curating agency Formavision—was a significant cultural happening to launch the electronic giant's new Aquos line of HD televisions." Formavision, agency; Sharp, client.

