

Source: Burners.Me: Burners and the Man (March 12, 2014)

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California Gleaming: World's Biggest Light Art to Stay



A year ago, Burning Man Project director, Disorient founder and blinky light impresario Leo Villareal revealed the [largest commission](#) in the history of electronic art: [\\$8 million](#) to install 25,000 LED lights on the north-facing San Francisco span of the Bay Bridge. Some have called the 1.8 mile, 26 football fields long [Bay Lights](#) the largest sculpture in the history of humanity – while it's certainly bigger than the Sphinx, I find this claim a bit of a stretch. The end result is amazing, for the best view of all get the ferry to the main ferry building just as the sun is setting.

The [Bay Lights](#) has been very popular since its debut, and was a notable feature of the city during the America's Cup competition. WordPress founder Matt Mullenweg stepped up at the last minute to enable the project, adding to his initial \$100,000 donation with a whopping [\\$1.5 million](#) contribution.



Leo's [programming](#) incorporated years of historical data related to the bridge:

Leo Villareal, a New Yorker who used to live in Silicon Valley, said he was inspired by the energy of the waves, tides, fog, wind, fish, boats on the bay, and the cars and trucks. "It's very open-ended, and people have very personal reactions to it"

More recently, some of the lights [started to go out](#):

In May, Ben Davis and his team noticed strands of the lights were staying on, while others were shutting off.

The problem seemed to be spreading, with 30-percent of the lights malfunctioning in some areas, marring artist Leo Villareal's vast moving display.

Technicians walked the bridge, inspecting the strands of lights strapped to the cables, suspecting the wind, salt air and constant vibrations as the culprits.

"In taking in what was going on they figured out there's a little bit of water was seeping in due to that harsh environment," said Davis. "That was just enough to cause those problems."

With the lights failing at a rapid pace, Davis pondered the worst-case scenario; turning off the lights and taking them down.

But instead, his team rallied.

Artist Leo Villareal reprogrammed the lights to work around the malfunctioning strands.

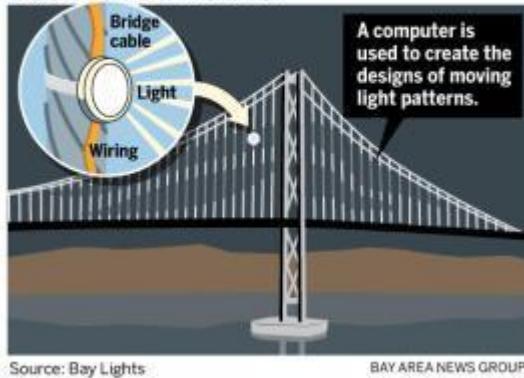
And light manufacturer Philips Color Kinetics agreed to finance repair and replacement of the lights as well as figure out a long-term solution.

"They've come in, they've helped us assess the problem," said Davis. "They've owned the problem and the solution and they're being completely responsible."

The response from the community to the Bay Lights has been very positive, boosting business and tourism. From [ABC Local](#):

How Bay Lights sculpture works

More than 250,000 LED lights, placed 12 inches apart and interconnected with wiring, have been attached to 300 of the bridge's vertical suspender cables.



"It's been overwhelming," said Bay Lights artist Leo Villareal. "We've had 25 million people have seen the Bay Lights over the last year and it's just an extraordinary response."

Artist Leo Villareal designed the computer-driven strands of LEDs that paint flowing patterns in the night sky and bring crowds to waterfront restaurants.

"People come in earlier and stay later in order to be able to enjoy the lights on the bridge," said Pete Sittnick with Waterbar and Epic Roasthouse.

Even hotels are getting a boost.

"Our top three floors, we've branded and marketed as Bay Lights rooms," said Kory Stewart with Hotel Vitale and Americano Restaurant. "And we've seen a 20 percent increase in those bookings. It's really become kind of a centerpiece of the neighborhood."

A centerpiece with an expiration date.

"This piece was installed with a two year lifespan in mind," Villareal said.

When Caltrans repaints the bridge in 2015, the lights will come down. But maybe not forever.

"The thought now is people really want the Bay Lights to remain for another 10 years, so we're embarking on that effort," Villareal said.

Rebuilding the lights as a permanent installation will cost \$12 million. It's money they'll have to raise privately and bit by bit.

Caltrans needs to take the lights down to paint the bridge. The plan is to get them back up and running in time for San Francisco to host the Superbowl in 2015, and install more hardy lights with a longer life span.



Above, one of the Bay Lights modules, with a sample of the cable it will be attached to. 3d Printing has been used in the prototyping.

Caltrans says the lights must be removed in March 2015, the end of the two years, so crews can paint the bridge for routine maintenance. And leaders of the Bay Lights project say they will raise \$12 million and get the necessary government permits for a second, longer act.

"Bay Lights has raised the bar worldwide on what can be accomplished with art in large public places," said Ben Davis, a board member with Illuminate the Arts, the nonprofit doing the project. "It has shown that a project can be done on this scale and bring the community together."

From [Bay City News](#):

Illuminate the Arts raised \$8.7 million to turn on the display in 2013 and keep it lit until March 2015.

At Thursday's anniversary event, Davis said the organization is kicking off a new fundraising campaign.

First, the group wants to ensure the lights stay on until 2016 after a brief scheduled shutdown next year for Caltrans to perform required maintenance.

He said the installation has to come down then for crews to make sure there is no rust and for paint touch-ups.

Once the show is back up and running, Illuminate the Arts is pushing to raise \$12 million to keep the lights shining until 2026, Davis said.

“The idea of not having it there is almost distressing,” he said.

The project extension still needs to be approved by Caltrans, according to the [Times Herald](#):

Villareal said he is confident the project will win another 10 years because of the experience gained in planning, funding and securing permits the first time around.

“It took an enormous amount of planning,” he said. “Yes. I think it will be easier this time.”

Caltrans and other agencies with jurisdiction over the bay and the Bay Bridge must approve permits to put back the sculpture. Caltrans officials had no immediate response on the new plan.

Davis said the wiring system can be put back in 2016, although newer and tougher LED bulbs will be installed to withstand the harsh bay weather...He said his group plans to have the light sculpture back in action in early 2016 when the Bay Area will host the 50th Superbowl at the 49ers’ new Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara.

The lights consume \$30,000 of electricity per year, which is [offset](#) by solar panels at UC Davis.