“This Light Installation Tracks Solar Activity in Real Time,” *The Creators Project*, January 30, 2016.

the creators project

This Light Installation Tracks Solar Activity in Real Time

Photo courtesy of Pierre Laporte Communication

Lights splash over two concrete cylinders in waves. They pulsate and spread, sometimes covering both columns almost completely in vibrant tones of blue and purple. The colors continually change, sometimes speeding up and then slowing down.

What sounds like a light show is actually a display of scientific information being processed in real time. SolarWind, a special commission that’s part of the Grand Paris project, is made possible with an algorithm that detects solar activity. Laurent Grasso created the piece to lend a poetic quality to the presence of solar flares.

The lights appear over two concrete silos of cement that make up a part of the Calcia distribution center. At more than 100 feet high, the silos serve as a monumental surface that the lights shine across. The cylinders stand close to the Périphérique orbital highway, a road used by more than 1 million drivers every day.

Grasso worked with the the Space Observatory, also known as the CNES (National Centre for Space Studies), to gather data. He then transformed this information into visual cues, carefully selecting the right colors for the piece.

“I chose a mix of representations between auroras, oscilloscope views, and all the possibilities of the light display system that we invented specially for SolarWind,” Grasso tells The Creators Project. “Of course, I also used the tacit intuitions that we all have: danger is signified with the red color, and for instance a very turbulent animation refers to a more intense activity of the Sun.”

SolarWind speaks to modernity and our connected age through its use of digital tools. Grasso also explains that the piece references March 13, 1989, the day that Canada suffered a blackout caused by a solar storm.

Each element of the piece creates a unique visual experience for passersby as they try to determine what the colors mean. Not only drivers will see the work — many of the high-rises in Paris Rive Gauche

also offer a view. Whether in a car or a building, viewers can take in the lights as they change throughout the day.

“First of all, it’s a slightly frightening sensorial encounter, when you get to see this gigantic beacon which announces something you can’t control in any way,” writes Grasso. “There is a code you have to find out, and you can’t really understand it at first, so it gets more and more frightening. It is a mix between the lights in Close Encounters of the Third Kind and the alert process in Soylent Green.”

Grasso also wants the public to understand the background behind the piece — to know that it serves as a scientific measurement as well as adding a new visual element to the area. He explains that this information, while reassuring in giving a logical explanation to a mysterious work of art, could also cause some anxiety in viewers. Now, they must grapple with “the existence of the solar winds” and come to terms with their “potential devastating effects.” The piece serves as a reflection: an admission that despite our ability to create beautiful works and useful tools with technology, Mother Nature still reigns supreme when it comes to our environment.

The installation premiered to the public on January 25 and will be on display for the foreseeable future.

“SolarWind was designed as a permanent artwork that would change Parisian skyline in a perennial way,” writes Grasso. “Technically, everything is set up so the artwork can last at least 10 years.”