



Hackers Show Light in a New Art

By [Steve Kettmann](#)

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BERLIN -- Leave it to Berlin's always unpredictable hacker group, Chaos Computer Club, to one-up the British art world's current sensation of the nanosecond.

Martin Creed won Britain's prestigious Turner Prize earlier this month -- and a ?20,000 check handed over by pop queen Madonna herself -- with [a work](#) that was nothing more than an empty room whose lights switch on and off. Whether the spectacle was a deadly wicked satiric comment on the scope of art -- or a perverse statement on the vapidty of the London art scene -- depends on your point of view.

What's clear is that it pales in comparison with the much more dramatic -- and fun -- statement the CCC has been making near East Berlin's famed Alexanderplatz this holiday season with its [Blinkenlights](#) display.

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Rather than settling for one room, the work uses 144 rooms spanning the top eight floors of an office building -- the well known Haus des Lehrers building, the former East German education ministry -- just across the street from Alexanderplatz. Lights in different rooms are turned on and off at different times to make patterns, which are dramatically visible to the holiday revelers milling about the Christmas market now set up on Alexanderplatz.

Internet browsers can get in on the action by going to the site and directing the lights themselves. They can download software to make their own "movie" -- which, if it's good enough, will be shown on the building at regular intervals. Or they can play Pong, just by calling the right number on their mobile phone.

"You can even see it when you fly in and out of Tegel Airport," said CCC leader Andy Mueller-Maguhn, Europe's ICANN representative. "If you're sitting on the left side of the plane as it's arriving at Tegel, you can see it. But playing Pong from a mobile phone is not allowed on the plane."

It all started in September for the CCC's 20th anniversary party -- and in fact, the first day the lights were flashing no one paid much attention. "We started it on Sept. 11, probably the worst day to do anything," said CCC hacker Tim Pritlove, one of the originators of the Blinkenlights concept along with Mueller-Maguhn, and the project leader.

"But we survived, and after a couple of weeks people noticed it's still there. We get tons of reaction every day. It's absolutely marvelous."

Interest has actually picked up over time. That's partly because of media attention, mostly inside Germany, and also because the lights have a knack for getting attention.

"Just after the war in Afghanistan started, they had a peace sign up there on the building," said Anja Weinhold, 25, a political science student at Berlin's Free University. "I was actually in Detroit at the time, but I saw it on the Internet."

The CCC reports about 10,000 visitors a day at the website, where a webcam gives the latest

patterns flashing on the building, updated every half-minute or so. People from all over the world, including Greece, Croatia and Argentina, have sent in their own "movies" to be shown on the building.

"It's pretty far away from Cinemascope, but in the end you can tell the same story with it," Pritlove said.

That may be debatable, but then, maybe it's why everyone from local politicians to passersby heading home after a visit to Alexanderplatz have been paying attention to the light display.

"I think it's great," said Linn Herger, 17, a high school student waiting for the *strassenbahn* near the Haus des Lehrers building. "When you stand here waiting for the train, it gives you something interesting to look up at. Some people have no idea what it's about."

The flashing of the 144 rooms can be confusing, though. "Sometimes I don't know what it is," Herger said. "One time I saw a ball going from one side to the other, and I didn't know what it meant. Now I know it was Pong."

The exhibit will be on display for at least two more months, so Pritlove and Mueller-Maguhn encourage people everywhere to send in their own animated sequences to flash on the building this holiday season. It can make for quite a sensation, out there near Berlin's [famous TV tower](#)

In fact, Mueller-Maguhn hopes that the current project might spur the CCC on to an even grander undertaking: turning all of Berlin, or another city, into a light display hooked up to a website.

"We want to realize Blinkenlights with a whole city," he said.

As for Martin Creed, the Brit who has made waves with a single room and its flashing lights, Mueller-Maguhn and Pritlove both laughed when they heard about his project and the prize it won.

"One empty room? With the lights going on and off?" Mueller-Maguhn said with mock incredulity. "Maybe the jury should come on over here to Alexanderplatz."

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