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THE STATE OF INTERACTIVE ART

Display until March 15

BODY MOVIES

A Linz Ars Electronica Festival award winner on the state of interactive art

by RANDY GLADMAN

Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6 2001–2 Robotic xenon projectors, 1000-square-metre screen, custom-made shadow tracking system, 1200 portraits on duratrans film, PA system, control computers
Installation at City Hall, Linz, Austria

Installing large-scale, interactive artworks in heavy-traffic zones of cities around the world, Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer explores the intersection between new technologies, public space, active participation and "alien memory." This year, as part of the Ars Electronica Festival of new-media art in Linz, Austria, the artist transformed the city's main square for six nights with one of his grandest projects to date.

Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6, a work activated by the participation of passersby, entails more than 1,000 square metres of projections onto the city's Old City Hall building. Thousands of portraits taken on the streets of Linz, Rotterdam, Madrid, Mexico City and Montreal are projected on giant screens using robotically controlled projectors located on towers around the square. Powerful xenon light sources placed at ground level wash out the portraits, but as people cross the square their shadows appear on the screen and reveal them again. Each time the shadows of the participants match the scale and shape of the projected images, an automatic command introduces a new set of portraits. As the audience discovers the process, the viewers' play becomes more sophisticated. As they express their identities in a huge public forum, the result is an artwork that invites its participants to retake urban space.

Lozano-Hemmer is Mexican-born and Canadian-educated. For *Body Movies*, he received the Prix Ars Electronica Award for Distinction in Interactive Art. He has been exhibiting his large-scale interactive artworks around the world for 12 years as one of a few highly influential Canadian artists working in the new-media field who have received international accolades. Though relatively unknown in Canada, this group also includes Prix Ars Electronica 2002 award winners David Rokeby and Luc Courchesne. Together, they have become widely recognized in Europe for their contributions to the development of interactive technologies, especially their innovations with "interfaces," those boundaries across which people and computers meet and communicate.

I met Lozano-Hemmer in the airy and energetic Skyloft, atop the Ars Electronica Center on the bank of the Danube. We discussed the fusing of electronic and public art, issues of spectacle versus intimacy, the importance of interface and Canada's contributions to and acceptance of the new-media art field.

I am interested in your relationship to David Rokeby and Luc Courchesne, the other Canadian interactive artists receiving awards at this year's Prix Ars Electronica. Is there a Canadian movement in interactive art happening? Lozano-Hemmer: I've followed Rokeby's and Courchesne's work for quite a while and my work

[RLH]

I am a Mexican-Canadian, a Chicanadian, a Mexicanuck.

is definitely informed by them. What Canada does is very interesting in that it expends a lot of effort on electronic media art because it likes to think of its culture as a McLuhanesque extension of media. For a very long time, Canada has been relatively pioneering in supporting artists in developing new ways of bringing technology into the cultural realm. Rokeby and Courchesne are two of the key figures in that movement. But on the other hand, their work is better known in Europe and Japan than it is in Canada itself. The situation for Canadian artists is that there are extremely good creators there and funding support, but when it comes to showing the work, to reaching audiences and the public, more effort needs to be developed.

How does that relate to the support for art, or more specifically new-media art, in other countries? Sometimes fostering a public and a cultural context is as important as supporting the artists themselves. At Ars Electronica, you get the feeling that because it has been happening for so many years, there is a public that sees how the work extends beyond just the machine. Electronic art has finally reached a level where there is a vocabulary beyond the interface, beyond the initial steps. Cinematography went through an initial period where people paid more attention to the projector than to the film itself, and then eventually a language and a criticism developed. Electronic art is finally starting to register within contemporary art. Media artists are beginning to enter the established contemporary art scenes, and also many contemporary artists who had been using video or installation are now starting to use electronic media. The collapse of the boundary is healthy for everybody.

Has new-media art changed recently? What institutions do you see as setting an example for the way this art should be supported? One of the really important precedents is the Banff Centre. It still is. Their art and virtual-environment residencies were crucial at a time when virtual reality was still very much just hype. Now is a good time to do VR work because the hype is over, nobody still believes that this is cutting edge, the technologies are a lot more widely distributed and easier to access. Today, the Daniel Langlois Foundation in Montreal has the most commendable and best thought-out support programs that I have ever seen. In terms of the Canadian scene, what would be really fabulous is for the distribution of these works to be seen as an inherent part of their creation. I have done pieces for the past 12 years and presented only one project in Canada (*The Trace*), in Montreal, and that was in the context of a Mexican show. I am a Mexican-Canadian, a Chicanadian, a Mexicanuck. The project I am showing here in Linz was funded by the Canada Council for the Arts and though I've shown it in Rotterdam and Lisbon, I'd love to show it back in Montreal or Vancouver or whatever. It will soon be in England at the Liverpool Biennial.

This work, *Body Movies*, is all about how people interact with art in the public space. How have audiences responded differently in different cities? Every time we show this piece, the behaviours are totally different, ranging from playful parading to erotic performances to aggressive stances. On average, about half the participants try to match the portraits by enlarging or reducing their shadows, while the other half is more interested in playing with each other's shadow. It depends on the time of day and how long the piece has been on display. In Rotterdam, after the work had been showing for a few days, participants started using props. Breakdancers appeared. People brought their pets. A man in a wheelchair projected his shadow 22 metres high and he seemed to derive a lot of pleasure from crushing everybody around him. It is a learning experience to see how people self-represent. This is what I am most interested in. How we use technology or, in this case, amplification to reactivate our city, to make it our own. The political or corporate takeover of the city takes place in such insidious ways. Everywhere we look there is advertising, an inescapable commercial monologue. Left outside of this system is us, the consumers. Short of graffiti or skateboarding, how else do we form part of the city?

What you are doing is graffiti, but it is like a government-sanctioned graffiti. The government has given you the money to pull it off, it is not permanent, yet people are invited to create their own logo, their own brand on the face of a government edifice. Yes, but what is crucial is that the piece is out of control. Even if we receive government or corporate sponsorship it is always clear that the installation needs to establish a level of trust so that, for example, participants will never be censored, subjected to advertising or told what they can and cannot do. To me it is also important that this takes place on the Old City Hall, because we are living in a crisis not only of urban space but also of representation, and people feel more and more distant from their so-called representatives in politics. Shadows are metaphors of otherness or fragility or ephemerality. When they are projected on the Old City Hall, the centre of power, I hope that there is a connection made which shows the distance between the political situation of the people and their elected representatives. The crisis of representation is reactivated by these shadows in a kind of tangential way.

So is this civic art? I see it as public art. Very much. I like to compare it more to a public fountain or a park bench than to a spectacle. I had some reservations about how Ars Electronica presented the piece as opening at a particular time and date. A lot of people then come up and expect a light show, theatre, fireworks—something passive like that. But this work is not like that at all. It is weird, humbling. If no one
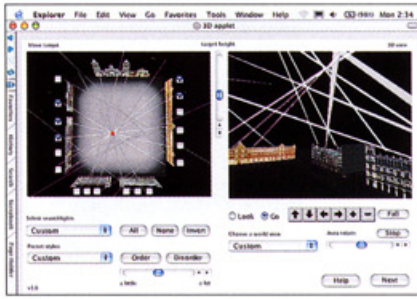
Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4 1999–2002 Large-scale telematic installation with 18 robotic searchlights controlled by the public over the Internet at http://www.alzado.net Installation at Zocalo Square, Mexico City Photo Martin Vargas

participates, then the piece does not exist. It is performed on a spectacular scale but it is not a spectacle.

What is wrong with spectacle? Nothing. To an extent it is inevitable. I make use of spectacle technologies. But I want to turn them around. My emphasis aims to avoid a preconceived outcome. I frankly don't know what will happen when one of these pieces is turned on. I'll give you an example. The first time I used shadows was at the architecture biennial in the city of Graz, Austria, in 1997. I intended to use shadows for the transformation of a military Arsenal that was supposed to defend Graz from the invasion of the Turks. But the Turks never actually reached Graz, so their presence was only ever felt as a shadow. So I made this piece called *Re:Positioning Fear* with Will Bauer and I thought the shadow was going to be this dark and ominous and expressionistic interface and I was completely wrong. I thought it would be metaphoric of a scourge, and yet the moment we put it on, people started playing. It was much more about their local relationships than any historical reference. The behaviours totally surprised me and taught a really interesting lesson. *Body Movies* also uses the shadow interface but this time the piece is about plasticity, embodiment, representation and puppetry.

There is a lot of data that is generated while the piece is in action. The scenes change automatically after all the portraits in a given scene are revealed by shadows, things like that. Are you collecting the data? Do you intend to use it? I do collect it. For instance, in Rotterdam, I collected more than 30 hours of video and here in Linz we are also recording. I think it would be an interesting exercise to sit down and look at how people behave differently from city to city and with this data question what constitutes locality. In the end it is a performance. Identity, like locality, is a performance that we all take part in.

Are there plans to show the work in North America? Placing the piece in some North American cities would be difficult. The site has to be a central plaza that already has a lot of pedestrian traffic

at night and no cars. I mean, in LA, people drive to Santa Monica to walk there. I would have to very carefully position this piece someplace where people are not going to have to go specifically or it will disappoint them. They have to just encounter it in their day-to-day space and then see themselves and relate that way. I'm talking to some people in New York and hopefully it can happen there.

Body Movies takes place on such a large scale and in a public space, yet the work is intimate and examines the relationship between viewers and themselves and how they present themselves publicly. These are very intimate issues. Are you interested in intimacy as a theme? The whole question of intimacy is a really important one for me. Not that I have any solutions for it or anything. In interactive art the viewer is an integral part of the artwork, so many artists attempt to foster intimacy by personalizing experiences, by establishing close relationships. But I think it is equally important to look for more theatrical kinds of interactivity. When we look at 90 percent of electronic art, including my own, there are usually only one or two active participants. I come from a performance-art background and I am interested in more collective and connective experiences that several people partake in. The idea that you are sharing in the complicity of a performance and watching something with people you don't know goes beyond computers. There is a communion. Robert Lepage has said that computers are great for communicating. What they are not good at is communion. Communion understood as the acknowledgement of complicity. *Body Movies* is the first piece where I have felt that there can be both an intimate personal presence—one's shadow—and a larger social performance with emergent group narratives.

Krzysztof Wodiczko also does these large public projections, he is also half Canadian, and he frequently incorporates the political sphere by careful selection of the public buildings used in the artworks. Is there an influence and how is it manifested in your work? Krzysztof Wodiczko is perhaps the artist that I most admire. Precisely for that reason I try to go out of my way to make work that is extremely different than his. I'd like to think that this difference is that his work comes from the deconstructive tradition of questioning the grand narratives of these buildings. He analyzes their hidden agendas of power and then subverts them with site-specific interventions that are, in my opinion, very effective but also very moralistic. I'm not interested in that for my own work. I call my work relationship-specific, not site-specific. I don't look for the inherent memories of a building to try to highlight. I try to establish environments

where these buildings can decline the role that they are normally given so they can, for a little while, be something other than themselves and have new relationships with the public. I am interested in the connection of disparate realities. This is why most of my pieces are designed to be portable. The old idea of site is problematic when we think of the Internet, globalization and our era of non-location. We now live in multiple realities and works that use new technologies are somehow overlaying this electronic reality onto the everyday.

Having said that, what is the importance of interface to your work? Most of my work has always been developing interfaces, usually with my long-standing collaborator Will Bauer. Like Rokeby, most of the artists at Ars Electronica develop their own software and hardware and that is interesting because the boundaries become blurry: artist/engineer, medium/message, form/content and author/public. When you are working with technology, you are always part of a collaboration. You are always in a dialogue. I like the idea that media arts can be compared to performing arts. There are several roles. There is programming, writing, music, whatever roles you have. Even if you are alone with Photoshop, you are already collaborating with a bunch of programmers who made some rules. Normally the artist tries to break those rules. Interfaces are most interesting when they are intuitive, not in the way of the interaction. *Body Movies* is the first piece I have made where the interface does not really need to be explained, no instructions or menus are needed, as we all already have a sophisticated vocabulary of things that we can do with our shadow. The interface is a language we have to question— poetically and critically.

Do you have interest in making work with discrete objects, things that can be framed or go into people's homes, or are you solely interested in this kind of performative, time-based exploration? My economic model is based on performing arts. I show a piece and I charge a certain amount per performance. Lately I have been making installations that are more for gallery or museum space. I'm beginning to explore that. As the art market or art community opens up to electronic art, issues of conservation or collection come in.

Are you dedicated to electronic art or is that simply the medium you have been working in primarily? My work is not always electronic. I have made pieces that are not based on electronic media in the past. However, I think that we live in a technological culture. Even if you are not using a computer, you are affected by this environment. Working with technology is inevitable. I don't work with it because it is original. I always use the word *alien* instead of the word *new*. The precedents for new are so large. But if you say alien, it is simply something that does not

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belong there. You put together things that you have already seen before but the specificity is temporary and local.

Do you see your work within the light of the increased utopian aspects of new media? Well, no. I do love utopian ideals and romantic scenarios, and I think it is important to come up with beautiful hypothetical constructions. However, these constructions usually crumble when it is time to get involved in the dirty world of politics and logistics and misinterpretation and hormones. Most utopian models, when they are not pure poetry, are a cop-out, as they don't deal with the intricacies of our local immediate situation. I would distance myself from utopia.

Two Origins, Relational Architecture 7 2002 Heretical texts revealed by the projected shadows of passersby, utilizing robotic xenon projectors and computer control Installation at Place du Capitole, Toulouse, France

How has Marshall McLuhan's writing influenced on your artistic practice? I am informed by the idea that technology is not something that happens out there; that it happens as part of our body and we cannot observe it as if we can be objective. We are part of it. Those kind of very Canadian lessons are part of my work.

Was Michael Snow important to you? Yes. Snow is important to any contemporary artist. There are also other people from his generation that have been influential and I feel allegiance to a number of the Canadian artists. But again, I've usually seen their work in Europe and not so much in Canada.

Why does this happen? How do you interpret the Canadian art audience? In Mexico, artists have a very defined role. When people know you are an artist, right away they call you maestro. You are a barometer of society. Often your views are published alongside those of economists and politicians. It is a romantic situation that has a slightly authoritarian side. Whereas sometimes in Canada, and in the US, there is a feeling that the artist does not contribute that much to society. Artists are outside of the mainstream. I don't want to say Mexico is better or anything like that. It's just a question of emphasis. In Canada, the emphasis is on technology. It is a country proud of the fact that Graham Bell invented the telephone in Ontario. ∎

Gladman, Randy. "Body Movies. A Linz Ars Electronica Festival award winner on the state of interactive art", *Canadian Art*, vol. 19, no. 4, Winter 2002 , p. 61.