

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

# Recorders





2005  
 A video art project featuring  
 colorful portraits projected  
 onto the shadows of passers-  
 by. The installation by the East  
 End Project Development Agency,  
 located below the Manchester Gate,  
 2005.



# Play-Back

*(...) No one could distinguish them from living persons (they appear to be circulating in another world with which our own has made a chance encounter). If we grant consciousness, and all that distinguishes us from objects, to the persons who surround us, we shall have no valid reason to deny it to the persons created by my machinery. When all the senses are synchronized, the soul emerges.'*<sup>1</sup>

Dr Morel in *The Invention of Morel*, Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1940

The most important source of inspiration for Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's exhibition *Recorders*, is the novel *The Invention of Morel* by Adolfo Bioy Casares, published in Argentina in 1940. A science fiction novel, which anticipates scientific developments, it introduces a post-photographic device which records and projects in three dimensions. What the artist defines as 'co-presence', and 'projected absence', are at the centre of the novel and of Lozano-Hemmer's work. The artist explains: 'A lot of my work is about interpenetration, embodiment and co-presence. I like stressing the way many realities co-exist in the same time and space.'<sup>2</sup>

*The Invention of Morel*, tells the story of a fugitive who escapes to an uninhabited island with a single building, an abandoned museum. One day he discovers that the museum is not uninhabited any longer, but that a party of people is visiting it, and that the building has recovered its original liveliness. He falls in love with an enigmatic woman called Faustine. After the strange and sudden disappearance of the party, he discovers that the events in the museum are repeated again and again and that Faustine cannot see or interact with him because developments there are the result of the projection in three dimensions of 'presences' by a strange machine invented by Dr Morel, the host of the party. This machine not only records sight and hearing, but tactile sensations, smell and temperature, and in synchronizing all the senses, the soul. Obsessed by his love and desire for Faustine, he discovers how the machine works and finds the way to superimpose on the events already recorded, a new, carefully staged recording of a fictitious relationship with Faustine that would then repeat to eternity. As the machine records it destroys the life of everything it touches, thus immortality comes at the cost of mortality.



*The Trace, remote insinuated presence 1995.*  
The tracked presence of remote participants is represented live by robotic lights and positional sound. Telefonica Foundation collection, shown here at the Musée des Beaux Arts, Montreal.  
Photo: Jonathan Wenk.

Every work in the exhibition *Recorders* involves a form of memory; the memory of people's faces, heart beats, finger prints, bodies in motion, voices, written words, and objects. This superimposition of bodies over bodies, experiences over experiences, implies that you experience someone else within your shadow. There is a sense of losing and encountering the self in this exercise. Both the authority of the artist and the self in the spectator are destabilized. The artist explains: 'There are notions of otherness, complicity and puppetry that I hope are elicited'<sup>3</sup>

For example in *Body Movies*, 2001, photo portraits of people were taken on the streets of the cities where the work is exhibited. The portraits only appeared inside the projected shadows of the public passing-by. *People on People*, 2010, a work commissioned for this exhibition, is described as 'a large-scale interactive installation designed to displace the public's image in real-time, creating a platform for embodiment and interpenetration'. In this work, as people walk around the space, they view the shadows of live and recorded images of other visitors while being recorded themselves to be played back on someone else's shadow. In *Microphones*, 2008 – on view in *Recorders* – an interactive installation featuring 10 vintage microphones, the public is invited to speak into a microphone, and automatically the voice is recorded while the voice of a previous participant or a recording at random from up to 600,000 that each microphone can store is played back. As the work speaks back to the participant, again a dialogue is being established with an other who most likely will be an unknown entity. In *Close-Up Shadow Box*, 2006, also in the show, a similar phenomena occurs, whereby when a person stands in front of the box, it automatically begins recording a video of the spectator, and inside the viewer's silhouette,

it reveals hundreds of small videos of other people who have looked at the piece previously. The overlay of the shadow, of the voice, of the bodies, of the memory and trace of the other, while creating both uncertainty and intimacy, brings awareness of the self.

Electronic art<sup>4</sup> encounters more opposition and critical disbelief than more conventional forms of art. Because of the generalized ignorance towards technology in the art world and the close association of technology to mass consumer culture we tend to automatically distrust its subjective and poetic potential, even its conceptual and transgressive characteristics. Also, electronic art is inevitably associated with an idea of the new which is often contrary to the more subtle, complex and ambitious workings of the art. The pioneers of today's complex artistic activity involving technology and science go way back, particularly to the experiments of the turn of the 19th century by people such as Étienne-Jules Marey, Eadweard Muybridge, Edison and Lumière. One of the fundamental aspects shared by science and art is its experimental, creative, research-based quality, as well as its interdisciplinary nature. Today's electronic art would not exist if artists such as Picasso (collage) and Duchamp had not incorporated found objects into art; kinetic artists, photographers, and pop artists, or electronic musicians, would not have experimented with industrial materials, without conceptual art's emphasis on ideas; without the live art and interactivity proposed by Dada, Fluxus artists, Happening, Performance artists; and without experimentation with technological innovation by video artists, filmmakers, installation artists, and so forth. Today's electronic art is part of a continuum of exploration and transgression; of a conceptual, aesthetic, subjective



*Two origins* 2002.  
Giant shadows reveal the  
Cathar "Book of Two Origins".  
Commissioned by Festival  
Printemps de Septembre for the  
Place du Capitole, Toulouse.



and poetic experimentation. Technology and the individual are inseparable, they occupy the same space, they coexist inevitably.

Duchamp in the early twentieth century created the ready-made, where everyday mass-produced objects were displayed in art galleries, and as David Batchelor has argued, via this displacement on to an un-worked industrial object, 'Duchamp sought to draw attention, not to the intrinsic beauty of bicycle wheels and bottle racks but to the conventions, habits and prejudices underlying our expectations of art and of the circumstances under which we normally view it.'<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the Purists who saw machinery as the embodiment of the highest form of human achievement, or the Futurists' celebration of machinery as the core of modernity, Dada artist Francis Picabia created a series of 'Mechanomorphic' portraits, diagrams made of collaged mechanical forms, and pictures where he copied and pieced together fragments of technical illustrations that resulted in absurd machine-like forms which often possessed anthropomorphic qualities and sexual connotations. These works are simultaneously an acknowledgment of how the modern machine had become part of human existence while literally deconstructing the logic and power of the machine. These were times of war, and the machine was associated negatively to war's destruction, in the same way that today's artists working in technology, such as Lozano-Hemmer, question the way the state uses surveillance technology to oppress and classify people. In 1936 the Surrealists organized an exhibition of Surrealist Objects at the Galerie Charles Ratton in Paris. In this exhibition works ranged from ready-mades by Duchamp, to 'Mathematical Objects' from the Institut

Poincaré in Paris, the latter ones with the idea that the rationalist opposition between scientific and poetic objects was superfluous. The Surrealists embraced the idea of metaphor conceived as a state of ambiguity where the juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities generated a crisis, a collision of terms, an encounter of sorts. This encounter was often driven by desire. The intersubjective social interaction which emerges from participating in the shadow reflections in works such as *Body Movies* and *People on People*, can be seen as an intimate poetic indeterminate encounter with desire. The realization of desire is brought about by superimposing or linking several consciousnesses or multiple realities in the self. There is a carnivalesque quality – as in Bakhtin – in the experience of works such as these. Through humour, laughter, participation, puppetry, involvement, hierarchies are inverted, the authorial authority questioned, and the boundaries of the self and the other destabilized.

A leitmotiv in Lozano-Hemmer's work – aside from dealing with surveillance issues – is its interactive nature, but not in terms of the public acting in the 'mechanistic' mode of pressing buttons, or responding to a menu-based system. This interaction is not automated and it often involves immersive experiences where the whole body by engaging with the work, engages inevitably with others. The focus of the interaction is that the public, the individual – not the collective – engages and discovers her/himself in connection with others. As Stephen Wilson has explained, as the field of interactivity related to computer-based media has matured, artists and theorists have sought to deconstruct interactivity, to move away from a control based interactivity where the viewer adopts the role of 'passive consumer'. He explains:

'Conventional interactivity comes out of the disciplines of computer-human interface design and engineering, whose agendas focus on efficiency and productivity rather than on more artistic goals such as provocation, discovery, nuance, and exploration.'<sup>6</sup> Interesting artists such as Jim Campbell propose systems that instead of stressing control are influenced by the public's feelings and intuitions. Lozano-Hemmer himself wrote in 1996 a text for *Leonardo* titled 'Perverting Technological Correctness'<sup>7</sup> which calls for transgressing the clichés associated with technology – let's not forget that many of today's technological advances were developed for military, security and market purposes, and the authoritarian implications of many technologies need to be transgressed – and proposes an interactivity which is relational, in lieu of coexistence, encounter, exchange and self-discovery, where the work can produce moments of uncertainty, insecurity, eccentricity, improvisation and absurdity.

The interactivity proposed by Lozano-Hemmer involves Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of intersubjectivity which concerns transgressing the boundary between one's own speech and the speech of others. In the mirror of the self in the other in works such as *People on People*, the authorial voice is a double voice, where the author infuses the spectator's discourse with his intention while still retaining the spectator's voice/image/memory. The spectator is not passive, but participates in the shaping of the author's voice/work. Understanding that one's speech is always and already formed out of the speech of others, and always seeks a response from others, Lozano-Hemmer's interactivity is dialogical, not authoritarian, and it involves the interpenetration of the authorial with the other. As this dialogue is open, it is somewhat unpredictable. This dialogical situation has a multiplying effect; as the author somehow loses himself in the other, the spectator loses her/himself in others too in an interminable cycle. In the same way that Dr. Morel recorded his guests at the museum and their tridimensional shadows, creating a virtual though tangible posterity, the viewers in Lozano-Hemmer's exhibition, in becoming participants, will be recorded to be converted then into someone else's experience.

A metaphor for the shadows in Lozano-Hemmer's work, and relating to Morel's projected images, can be found in Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight*, 1952, which relates the adventures of the knight Agilulf at the time of Charlemagne; he is virtuous, perfect and faithful and his only problem is that he does not exist. At the end of the story he removes his armour and disappears. This story calls for some parallels to be drawn also with the Fugitive's affirmation of immateriality in *The Invention of Morel*, in a certain ambiguous though dialogical relationship with corporeality. The experience of the self – or the other – through someone else's shadow is 'virtual' though it is vivid, poetic and real. Lozano-Hemmer states: 'In modern science, there exists the idea that the vacuum is a place of enormous quantum

mechanical activity... at any given moment, matter and anti-matter are created and destroyed... The result over time is zero but this is the sum of all the reactions that occur below the threshold of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.'<sup>8</sup>

'A single garden, if the scenes to be eternalized are recorded at different moments, will contain innumerable paradises, and each group of inhabitants, unaware of the others, will move about simultaneously, almost in the same places, without colliding.'<sup>9</sup>

1. Adolfo Bioy Casares, *The Invention of Morel*, Prologue Jorge Luis Borges, Translation 1964, Ruth L. C. Simms [New York: The New York Review of Books, 2003. First published: Buenos Aires, Argentina, Editorial Losada, 1940] p. 71.
2. "Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in Interview with Cherie Frederico", *Aesthetica*, Issue 36 Aug/Sept 2010 pp. 30-33.
3. Ibid
4. Much debate and contradiction exists in regards to the terminology used for technology based art and no single term may suffice as encompassing nomenclature. Terms such as information art, digital art, media art, electronic art, are being used, nevertheless terms such as Information and digital art, even though not inappropriate, leave out important formal, material and social aspects of the work such as interaction. Definitions such as participation art, relational art, interactive art may not be specific enough to the medium. Terms such as contemporary or experimental art, though defining, are simply too general. The choice of Electronic art as terminology in this text is done knowingly of its partial adequacy.
5. David Batchelor in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars*, Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood [New Haven & London: Yale University Press, in association with the Open University, London, 1993] p. 35.
6. Stephen Wilson, *Information Arts: Intersections of Art, Science and Technology*, Leonardo Series, [Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002], pp. 653-654.
7. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Perverting Technological Correctness", *Leonardo* [Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1995].
8. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, correspondence with the author, 7th July 2010.
9. Adolfo Bioy Casares, Ibid, p. 83.





Fajardo-Hill, Cecilia. "Play-Back." Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Recorders, exhibition catalogue, 18 Sept. 2010 - 30 Jan. 2011, pages 20-25. Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester (english)