

ALIEN RELATIONSHIPS FROM PUBLIC SPACE

A winding dialog with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

By Alex Adriaansens and Joke Brouwer
(Published in the book “Transurbanism” 2002)

From August 31 to September 23, 2001 the Schouwburgplein square in the centre of Rotterdam was transformed by one of the largest interactive installations ever made for public space. Over one thousand portraits —taken on the streets of Rotterdam, Madrid, Mexico and Montréal— were projected on the façade of the Pathé Cinema building using robotically controlled projectors located on towers around the square. The portraits could not be seen when the square was empty because powerful xenon light sources placed at floor-level completely washed them out. As soon as people walked on the square, however, their shadows were projected on the building and the portraits were revealed within them. Passers-by could move around and match the scale of a portrait by going toward or away from the building, making their silhouettes between 2 and 22 meters high. A camera-based tracking system monitored the location of the shadows in real time and, when the shadows matched all the portraits in a given scene, the control computer issued an automatic command to change the scene to the next set of portraits. This way the people on the square were invited to embody different representational narratives. Over 50 people could take part at any given time, controlling 1,200 square meters of projections and creating a collective experience that nonetheless allowed discrete individual participation.

This was Body Movies, the sixth in the “Relational Architecture” series of installations in public space designed by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (CDN/MEX) for cities in Europe and Latin America. These interactive interventions —in Madrid, Linz, Graz, Mexico City, Havana and Istanbul— have been exploring the intersection between new technologies, urban space, active participation and “alien memory.”

Vectorial Elevation, shown in Mexico City from December 26, 1999, to January 7, 2000, is probably the best known of his works. It was a telerobotic installation that allowed participants on the Internet to design immense light sculptures over the Zócalo Plaza and the Historic Centre of the City. Any person visiting the website at www.alzado.net could make a design that would direct 18 searchlights placed on the rooftops of the National Palace, the Municipal Government and the buildings of the Mercaderes Arcade. Equipped with 7,000-watt xenon lamps, these powerful spotlights produced light beams that could be seen within a 15-kilometre radius.

V2: Your work seems to be founded on a rather strong idea of what public interactive pieces should be like and what the modern city is today. How do your public installations affect normal city life? Or to put it more generally: how do your pieces change the city in which they are shown?

RLH: Many people from Cicero to Churchill have been quoted as saying: “We make buildings, and buildings make us.” This is far from true in our time. Globalization has deepened the crisis in urban representation. The vast majority of buildings constructed today no longer represent local inhabitants or concerns. Instead we see two tendencies. The first is the erection of “default buildings”, that is, generic architecture that represents corporate culture and the optimization of capital. A default building in Montreal will be very similar to one in Mexico City because both are functions of the same formula that seeks a return on investment. The second tendency is what the Spanish architect Emilio López-Galiacho calls “vampire buildings” which are symbolic buildings that are not allowed to have a natural death, that are kept alive artificially through restoration, citation and virtual simulation. Vampire buildings are forced to be immortal due to “architectural correctness”, a cultural, political and economic conservative predisposition to assign an identitarian role upon a select number of buildings like Vicenza’s Villa Rotonda or Sevilla’s La Giralda. These two phenomena of default and vampire buildings are flip sides of the same coin.

So, an important aspect of my work in Relational Architecture is to produce a performative context where default buildings may take on temporary specificity and where vampire buildings may decline their role in their established, prevailing identification. The pieces are usually ephemeral interventions designed to establish architectural and social relationships where unpredicted behaviours may emerge. I want buildings to pretend to be something other than themselves, to engage in a kind of dissimulation. To accomplish this we use large-scale technologies of amplification that are usually reserved for publicity stunts and corporate events. These technologies are typically used to perform a pre-programmed commercial monologue, and it is always exciting to exploit them in ways they were not intended. Using projections, robotics, sound, net connections and local sensors, the input and feedback from participants becomes an integral part of the work and the outcome is dictated by their actions.

My work attempts to introduce “alien memory” as an urban catalyst. I prefer to say “alien” instead of “new”, because the word does not have the pretension of originality and simply underlines the fact that “it does not belong”. Body Movies transforms the Schouwburgplein Square by introducing huge portraits of people only matched in scale by the amplified shadow of passers-by. With this piece you see constant realignments taking place. For example, there is the movement in the square to embody the portraits, to “become” the alien representation, which is frustrated by the fact that the portraits change automatically the moment total embodiment happens. Also, there is the encounter between the dominant culture, which is Hollywood films being shown inside the cinema building, and shadow representation of the participants outside in the open space. This makes people look at the cinema building potentially as a membrane where two realities are co-present –an “internal exterior” as Jodorowski would call it.

The impact of these projects varies widely. In Vectorial Elevation, the installation in Mexico City, we had over 800,000 active net participants in twelve days, plus possibly millions looking at the work in the city and more through the media. Here in Rotterdam we have probably a couple thousand people participating every night and the piece runs for 23 days. Of course, it is easy to determine statistics on participation but these numbers tell us little about the impact of the pieces, if any, on the creation, perception and occupation of public space, which is what I am mostly concerned with. The best way to gather this information is to interview participants and this tends to be one of the more rewarding aspects of doing a project, as one becomes aware of the diverse reactions elicited.

V2: So far for the City as context. How would you position your work in the artistic context, in the realm of the arts?

RLH: My work is best situated somewhere between architecture and the performing arts. For me it is a priority to create social experiences rather than to generate collectible objects. The making of a piece itself is closer to developing a performance or a play than a visual artwork. For the most part, I work with my long-standing collaborator Will Bauer, but also with photographers, programmers, architects, linguists, writers, composers, actors or other staff that may be needed depending on the project.

Most of our work has been developed in media arts contexts, and within this I prefer collective experiences rather than using individual interfaces for solitary participation. In 1989 I interviewed Robert Lepage, the Canadian theatre director, about the impact of technology on the arts. He said, “computers can communicate very efficiently; but they can’t engage in communion”. I think he used the word communion not in its religious connotations but more as the acknowledgement of the human complicity that can’t be shared with computers. I find this idea very interesting, not because it sounds like an apology for humanism, which is in a well-deserved crisis, but because I think communication as a concept in Art is overrated and corporate. What’s more attractive is people meeting and sharing an experience, —a simple pleasure that composer Frederic Rzewski calls “coming together”. This concept, at least when referring to coming together in the flesh, is becoming more radical as people do it less and less thanks to telecommunications, urban design, increasing work load demands, and work schedule flexibility, to name a few factors.

I named the series of interventions “relational” in large part because I wanted to avoid using the term “interactive”. This word has become too vague, like “postmodern”, “virtual”, “deconstruction” or other terms that mean too many things and is exhausted. Duchamp said “the look makes the picture” and when we say that every artwork is interactive, the word is not that interesting anymore. Also it sounds too much like a top-down 1-bit trigger button —you push and something happens— which is too predatorial and simple. Of course “relational” is not my term, I read about it in Maturana and Varela’s neurological studies and

also the word has been used since the 60s to describe cross-referencing databases. The great Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica also used the term in the 60s to refer to their user-activated objects and installations. “Relational” has a more horizontal quality, it's more collective: events happen in fields of activity that may have resonances in several places in the network.

V2: With interactive installations there always seem to be two approaches for the audience: one can either participate, or one looks at the piece from a distance, and reflects on it. Is this true for your work also? How can people reflect while participating in Body Movies or Vectorial Elevation?

RLH: There are two main strategies for collective interactivity. The first one I call “taking turns”. You have one or two sensors and people take turns to use them, and the rest are spectators. Examples include Jeffrey Shaw's *Eve*, where one person controls the point of view of a virtual world projected on a large dome, Toni Dove and Michael Mackenzie's *Archaeology of a Mother Tongue*, where a tracking glove is used to navigate a narrative, and our *Displaced Emperors* where a participant wears a tracking system to transform the Linzer Castle. The other popular strategy for collective interactivity I call “taking averages”. This is what you have in interactive cinema experiences or in game shows: a voting interface where input gets statistically computed and the majority directs the outcome. This can be very frustrating and democratic; it makes you feel that your discrete participation goes nowhere. The challenge is how to open a piece for participation without taking averages or taking turns. In a way, *Body Movies* does this because on the one hand you can have the discrete individual participation, as one's shadow is recognizably one's own; but there are also emerging collective patterns of self-organization, as people may choose to interact with one another, with the building or with the portraits.

In some pieces action and reflection are not mutually exclusive. I will now make a big over-simplification about approaches to representation. The Italian approach is all about the window onto the world. You have this frame and you step back from the subject, from reality, as though looking through this neutral glass. This formula is what informs humanism and virtuality. In contrast, the Dutch approach—I am specifically thinking of Rembrandt and Van Hoogstraten—is based on artifice, on acting, on surface aesthetics like the camera obscura, anamorphosis and *trompe l'oeil*. The Italian metaphor implies that you can look at a subject objectively, while the Dutch emphasis is on foldings or reflections that are already taking place in our own corporeal space, where perception is an apparatus. The two cannot be clearly separated as I suggest, but the Dutch approach illustrates more clearly my preferred understanding of perception, which is that the act of seeing is the act of inventing. Spectators play an active role, not a passive one. You can also say the opposite. People who are participating are in fact reflecting. People are not innocent when they activate interactive works in a public space, and this already constitutes a certain ground for reflection. People are participating in these sort of interactive operations with a lot of knowledge and

awareness. It is important for me that they may understand the interface of the piece in an intuitive manner so that it does not become too distracting. In Body Movies people adopted the shadow interface very quickly, and they definitely played roles, in character, like Rembrandt was when he was doing his self-portraits.

In Vectorial Elevation this interpenetration of action and reflection was not so obvious. I received a lot of valuable criticism about the fact that when you look at the light sculptures over the plaza in Mexico City, your experience is one only of contemplation. You see this constant transformation of the lights overhead, but you're not actively involved in it. Even though we put computers in public access locations, that was not enough to have this more balanced outcome between acting and reflecting that we have here in Rotterdam. In Mexico there was definitely a power gradient, an asymmetry, and now when I see Body Movies I think it is so obvious. I'm looking forward to doing Vectorial Elevation again and finding more ways to get people to participate on-site.

In Body Movies there is a brief blackout that happens between each representation as the slides change to show new portraits. This blackout was something I did not want at first, —if I had used video there could have been a continuous transformation. But now I am extremely pleased with this “silence”. It introduces a rhythm and it makes everybody aware of his or her own presence. A kind of Brechtian “noticing of the knots”. This rupture has become a fundamental feature of the piece. It's one of those technological limitations that becomes a plus: “Oh, it's not a bug, it's a feature!”

V2: What exactly do you want your audience to reflect upon through the interactivity of your installations in public space?

RLH: It depends on the piece. Many times I don't have a clear agenda. It is very experimental. I seldom conceive an outcome but rather concentrate in establishing some initial conditions, a platform or vehicle where people can do whatever it is they're going to do through the constraints and affordances of the piece itself. I try to foster indeterminacy, through irony, or ambiguity, although of course the work is quite idiosyncratic in the end.

Body Movies, for example, was inspired by Samuel van Hoogstraten's engraving “The Shadow Dance”, which appears in his *Inleiding tot de Hogeschool der Schilderkunst*. Made in Rotterdam in 1675, this engraving shows a minute source of light placed at ground level and the shadows of actors taking on demonic or angelic characteristics depending on their size. Before proposing the piece I read Victor Stoichita's wonderful book, “A Short History of the Shadow”, where he outlines different relationships to shadows in Art: the shadow as a metaphor for being (Plato), the birth of representation and painting (Butades' daughter), the mysterious expression of the self (Shadowgrammes), and, most importantly, the expression of a hidden monstrosity or otherness (which is depicted in van

Hoogstraten's engraving). So my initial desire was to use artificial shadows to generate questions about embodiment and disembodiment, about spectacular representation, about the distance between bodies in public space, and so on. It is clear that those are my obsessions and most people participating in the piece probably are reflecting on something completely different, which is great.

I want to design anti-monuments. A monument is something that represents power, or selects a piece of history and tries to materialize it, visualize it, represent it, always from the point of view of the elite. The anti-monument on the contrary is an action, a performance. Everybody is aware of its artificiality. There is no inherent connection between the site and the installation. It's something that people may partake in, ad hoc, and knows it's a deceit, a special effect. The anti-monument for me is an alternative to the fetish of the site, the fetish of the representation of power.

I draw very careful distinctions between my interventions in public space and the work of artists —like Krzysztof Wodiczko or Hans Haacke— who make critical “site specific work”. To me most of their work is an exploration of the underlying power structures of a building, and the deconstruction of these “grands recits”. While I am a great fan of their work, I am more interested in temporary, minor histories that can be established with relationships between the site and the public. I like micro-politics. Many times my work derives from an existing special effect. Sometimes it's more historically motivated, sometimes it comes from the research of an interface. I have no problem saying that my work is effectist. But participation transforms special effects into what I call “special causes and effects”. Through participation special effects become something that is more dialogical, something that is more of an exchange. Depending on public participation is a humbling affair because the work will not exist without the main protagonist, which is the public as actor.

With very large interventions the question of the spectacular is often raised. When I did the project in Mexico City using searchlights, a technology with terrible connotations derived from Albert Speer's fascist spectacles of power, I was aware that those theatrics had an underlying quality: intimidation. The message was, “this is big, you are small”. In Speer's spectacle of power people were props, just like the searchlights were. I tried to introduce interactivity to transform intimidation into intimacy. That is, the capability to intervene in a space that was already authoritarian by virtue of its scale and meaning, and to be able to participate there at a personal scale, to be able to name it, to make it yours, to feel entitled to it. Most modern day son et lumière spectacles, such as Jean Michel Jarre's Millennium piece in the pyramids of Egypt, are also suspect in my opinion. That show was completely scripted, it lasted a few hours, a small number of people were privileged to attend, and in the end there was fog so nobody saw anything. More troublesome is the way these kinds of spectacles try to depict the richness of a culture by defining a linear historicist narrative of “representative” moments or actors in history. Each of those narratives must be

analyzed in terms of their exclusions, because there can never be a comprehensive, exhaustive nor neutral representation and what is shown is always a profile of the current elite. There is a very close connection between representation and repression: elites have always used such narratives to homogenize and control what are otherwise complex, dynamic social fabrics. I think work in public space should destabilize these prefabricated stereotypes and foster a critical rereading of the daily urban performance, opening opportunities for self-representation and intervention.

V2: To come back to where we started, the city and interactive public pieces: Do you want your audience to experience the city they live in more intensely through the alien memory that you bring into their familiar environment? Or do you want to alienate the city dwellers from their hometown and globalize them on the spot? Does it matter if you show, say, Body Movies in Rotterdam or anywhere else in the world? In other words: is the grounding of your work local or global?

RLH: The grounding of my work is not the history of the site, but the participation of the public. My specificity is not to sites, it's to relationships. In Body Movies I do use local references, like Van Hoogstraten and 17th century Dutch shadowgrammes, but these are tangents, lines of flight to look at the work. They're more like a starting point or a detonator. Almost every culture in the world has a very sophisticated vocabulary and tradition of shadow plays or shadow mythologies. Perhaps the city does not change with my work but the opposite is clearly true. As I remount a piece in a different city the range of response varies widely, and these variations are very revealing about what constitutes "location". I am currently organizing a tour for Body Movies and I am really looking forward to seeing how people's reaction differs in Seoul, Sao Paulo or Singapore. I think in most electronic artworks what's interesting is the cross-reference of different behaviours that emerge from showing in different settings.

"Placelessness" and "multiplace" are terms concerning the condition of the artwork, but also of ourselves, and of architecture. The feeling that you belong to nowhere, and that you belong to many places at the same time. These two things are the same phenomenon. Personally, I live between Madrid, Montreal and Mexico City and yet I feel like a foreigner in all three cities. I now talk about "going back homes", in plural. The sense of continuity and complicity is created through the persistence of connectivity and dialog with these places. Locality, like Identity, is a performance.

Every city is many cities in one, all of them overlapping and coexisting. I think coexistence is a very important concept. Two years ago I heard Edward Said speak about how he does not believe that the separation of Israel and Palestine, a reterritorialization on the basis of identity, will work. He called this approach "Identitarian", that is the authoritarianism that comes from identity and the definition of who's in and who's out. There have been centuries of coexistence of

different religions in the Middle East, and Said stresses that these models of coexistence should be reactivated and somehow be made more heroic. I find that very interesting, this possibility that you have in the same time and place intensely different planes of experience. The planes may be very different, but sometimes a small connection is being made, either locally or temporarily or post-geographically. There's always seepage between the different levels. We all live in relational space, and time. For me the emphasis is not on the fetish of the structure, on what is top and what is down, it's more in the interconnection, the relationship between two things, the relationship between our experience and the outside world of constructed, consensual, sensory experience, if it exists at all. For me what's important is where these worlds meet.