

Alien Relationships from Public Space

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer



Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6 (Rotterdam, the Netherlands)

Interview by Alex Adriaansens and Joke Brouwer

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is a Mexican-Canadian electronic artist working in relational architecture, technological theatre and performance art. His work has been shown in over a dozen countries. His writing has been published in a number of art and media publications, and he has been a member of several international juries and led many workshops and conferences. He received an Ars Electronica Golden Nica in 2000, a distinction in 2002, and Prix Ars Electronica honorable mentions in 1995 and 1998. He also won the award for Best Installation at the Interactive Digital Media Awards in Toronto, a Cyberstar award in Germany, a distinction at the SFMOMA Webby Awards in San Francisco, and an Excellence Prize at the CG Arts Media Art Festival in Tokyo. <http://www.lozano-hemmer.com>

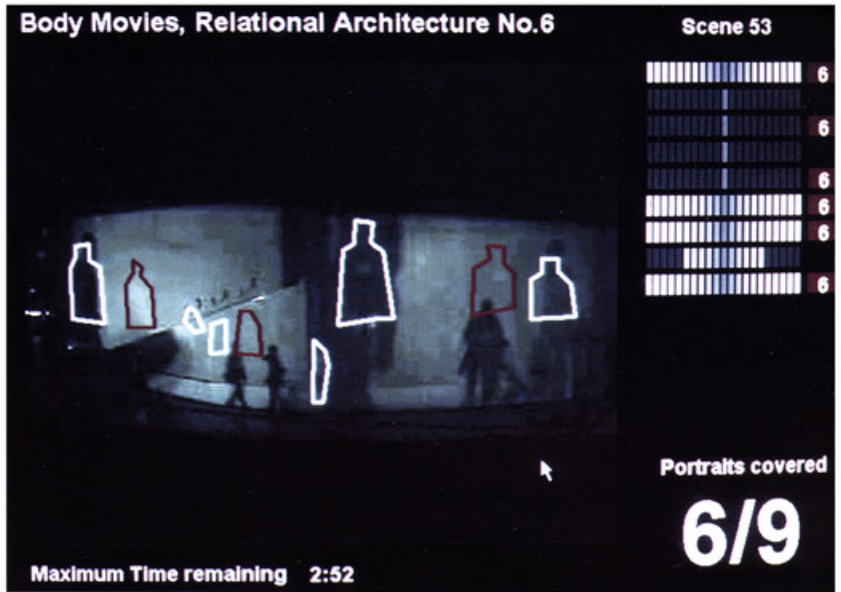
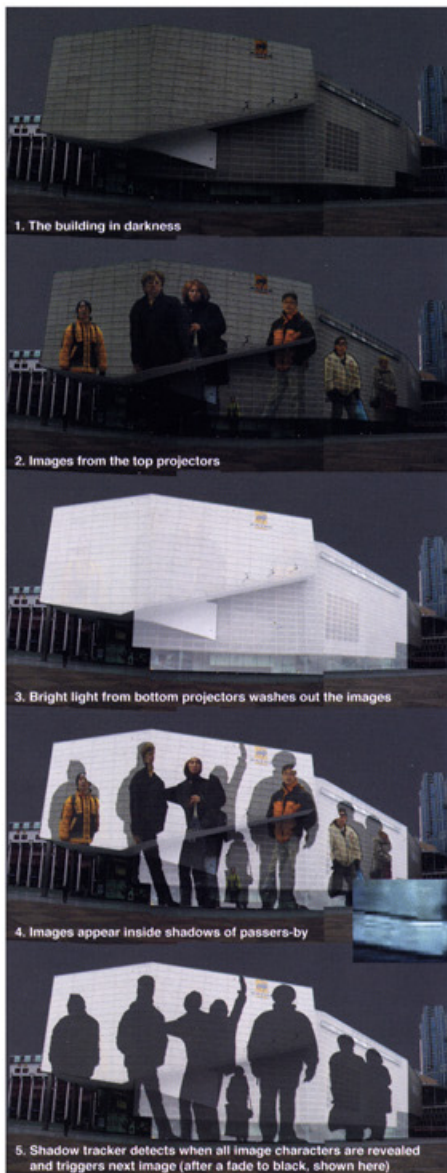
From August 31 to September 23, 2001, the Schouwburgplein square in central Rotterdam was transformed by one of the largest interactive installations ever made for public space. Over one thousand portraits taken on the streets of Rotterdam, Madrid, Mexico and Montreal were projected on the façade of 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 ground-level xenon lights washed them out. As soon as people walked onto the square, however, their shadows were projected onto the building and parts of the portraits were revealed within them. By moving around, passersby could match the scale of a portrait by going toward or away from the building, making their silhouettes anywhere between two 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. In 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 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's (Canada/Mexico) Relational Architecture series of installations in public space in European and Latin American cities. 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."

All photos by Jan Sprij unless otherwise indicated





Vectorial Elevation, shown in Mexico City from December 26, 1999, to January 7, 2000, is probably the best known of Lozano-Hemmer's works. It was a telerobotic installation that allowed participants on the Internet to design immense light sculptures over the Zócalo Plaza and the historic city center. Any person visiting the website (www.alzado.net) could make a design to direct the 18 searchlights on the rooftops of the National Palace, the Municipal Government and the Mercaderes Arcade. Equipped with 7,000-watt xenon lamps, these powerful spotlights produced beams that could be seen for 15 kilometers.

- Alex Adriaansens/Joke Brouwer: 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 cities in which they're shown?
- Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: 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 toward what the Spanish architect Emilio López-Galiacho calls "vampire buildings," symbolic buildings that are not allowed to have a natural death, but are kept alive artificially through restoration, citation and virtual simulation. Vampire buildings are forced to be immortal due to "architectural correctness," a culturally, politically and economically conservative predisposition to assign an identitarian role to a select number of buildings like Vicenza's Villa Rotonda or Seville's La Giralda. These two phenomena of

default and vampire buildings are flip sides of the same coin.

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' role of established, prevailing identification may decline. The pieces are usually ephemeral interventions designed to establish architectural and social relationships where unpredicted behaviors 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.



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These technologies are typically used to perform a pre-programmed commercial monologue, and it's 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 doesn't have the pretension of originality and simply underlines the fact that "it doesn't belong." *Body Movies* transforms the Schouwburgplein by introducing huge portraits of people only matched in scale by the amplified shadows of passersby. 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 representations, 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 representations 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 12 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's 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'm 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.

AAJB: 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's 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 cannot 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 cannot 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 is 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 workload 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 "post-modern," "virtual," "deconstruction" or other terms that mean too many things and is exhausted. Duchamp said "The look makes the picture," and if we say that every artwork is interactive, the word isn't 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 1960s to describe cross-referencing databases. The great Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica also used the term in the 1960s 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.

AAJB: 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 using 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 and in game shows: a voting interface where input is statistically computed and the majority directs the outcome. This can be very frustrating and democratic; it makes you feel that your



Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4 (Mexico City)
Photo by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer



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 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 on the world. You have a frame and you step back from the subject, from reality, as though looking through a neutral glass. This formula is what informs humanism and virtuality. In contrast, the Dutch approach – I'm 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 aren't 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's important for me that they understand the interface of the piece in an intuitive manner so that it doesn't become too distracting. In *Body Movies* people adopted the shadow interface very quickly, and they definitely played roles, in character, as Rembrandt did when he was doing his self-portraits.

In *Vectorial Elevation* this interpenetration of action and reflection wasn't 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 the constant transformation of the lights overhead, but you're not actively involved in it. Even though we put computers in public access locations, that wasn't enough to get the 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's 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's a brief blackout that happens between the representations 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'm 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!"

AAJB: 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's very experimental. I seldom conceive an outcome but rather concentrate on 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*



Photo by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

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 (shadowgrams), 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's 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, repre-

sent 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's 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'm a great fan of their work, I'm more interested in temporary, minor histories that can be established with relationships between the site and the public. I like micropolitics. 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've 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's more dialogical, something that's 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's 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.

AA/JB: 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, but to relationships. In *Body Movies* I do use local references, like Van Hoogstraten and 17th-century Dutch shadowgrams, but these are tangents, lines of flight to look at the work. They are 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 doesn't 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'm currently organizing a tour for *Body Movies* and I'm really looking forward to seeing how people's reactions differ in Seoul, Sao Paulo or Singapore. I think in most electronic artworks what's interesting is the cross-reference of different behaviors 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 dialogue 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 doesn't believe that the separation of Israel and Palestine, a reterritorialization on the basis of identity, will work. He called this approach "identitarian": that's the authoritarianism that comes from identity and the definition of who is in and who is out. There've 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 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 isn't on the fetish of the structure, on what is top and what is down; it's more on the interconnection, the relationship between two things, between our experience and the outside world of constructed, consensual, sensory experience, if it exists at all. For me, what is important is where these worlds meet.



Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4 (Vitoria-Gasteiz, Basque Country, Spain)
Photo by David Quintas

Alex Adriaansens studied at the Royal Academy of Art and Design in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. He is the director of V2_Organisation, which he cofounded in 1981. He is also a member of several advisory boards for organizations including De Berlage Institute, an architecture-research center in Rotterdam; the Transmedialle in Berlin; and the Piet Zwart Institute. He is on the advisory committee of the (Dutch) Foundation for Visual Arts, Architecture and Design. He has given presentations at many festivals and art institutes, including Dokumenta X, the Guggenheim Soho, Videopostive, the Museum of Modern Arts in Stockholm, arch+film.graz, and BSA.

Joke Brouwer studied at the Royal Academy of Art and Design at 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands. In 1981 she cofounded V2_Organisation and has since been a policymaker and organizer at V2_. She is also editor and designer of V2_'s publications, including posters, catalogs and books: *Book for the Unstable Media* (1992), *Interfacing Realities* (1997), *TechnoMorphica* (1997), *The Art of the Accident* (1998) and *Machine Times* (2000).