

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

# Recorders



RLH

# Interview: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

## Can you tell me about how you started doing art?

I started my career in the late 80s working with a group called PoMo CoMo that performed *Technological Theatres* and radio art. Our shows featured an excessive amount of computerized audiovisual gear and the subject of the shows was technology itself, – in particular, the joy of computers crashing. Our strategy was simple: 1) Overpromise, 2) Underdeliver, and 3) Apologize. Today I look back at that early body of work and I call those pieces *Crashers*. They are engines of empathy and irony. I still make crashers: at the studio we are developing an autonomous rover that instead of a solid body has a large convex lens, which concentrates the sun's rays and burns the wooden platform underneath it, over which it drives, until it gets stuck in the ashes.

## I have read that you consider your work closer to the performing arts than the visual arts, what attracted you to theatre and performance?

I met Jesusa Rodríguez, an incredible Mexican performance artist, while still with PoMo CoMo. She took issue with the name *Technological Theatre*. She asked: 'how can you mix something as advanced and sophisticated as theatre with something as primitive and infantile as technology?'. She was right of course, the language of electronic aesthetics and criticism did already have many speakers but it took a while for the dissemination of critical theories that brought some maturity and historical perspective to the field. Still, clearly rich theatrical approaches are valuable to stage artworks which take place – or create place – over time. So for a few years I worked with another group called *Transition State Theory* in a series of performances where dancers and actors would directly control their lights, video and sound. After each performance the general public was invited to

try out the sensors used by the cast so they could see that in fact the show was not just rehearsed to synchronize all the media, but that real-time interaction drove the entire stage. I call those pieces *Performers*, as they are in a way 'instruments' that are best played by trained actors, dancers or musicians, followed by interaction from the public. I still make performers: recently the Guggenheim Museum commissioned *Levels of Nothingness* a show where the voice of an actress, reading a libretto on the philosophy of colour, automatically triggered and controlled a full rig of Rock and Roll moving lights.

## Do you fit all your work into series like *Crashers* and *Performers*? Are there other series?

Well, they are not really series, more like keywords or categories that describe certain common traits, 'metadata' to use a nerdy buzzword. Coming out of the studio are other kinds of artworks: *Generators*, *Subsculptures*, *Trackers*, *Antimonuments*, *Glories*, *Recorders*, *Manifestos* and many others.

## So can an artwork belong to several categories?

Exactly! For example, like many of my colleagues in media art, some of my pieces use recursive algorithms, cellular automata, fractals or fluid dynamics to create complex behaviours that cannot be controlled, preprogrammed or predicted. The introduction of these 'non-linear maths' gives pieces the capability to have 'emergent' properties that are not random nor pre-established. I call those pieces *Generators*. An example generator is a recent piece called *Solar Equation* which was a scale model of the Sun, one hundred million times smaller than the real thing, showing computer-generated flares, turbulence and sun-spots.



*Solar Equation 2010.*  
Scale model simulation of the sun, 100 million times smaller than the real thing. Light in Winter Festival, Federation Square, Melbourne.

The project was also an *Antimonument* because it was an ephemeral intervention in public space that was always changing and did not seek to commemorate a famous or notable person or event.

#### **Let's talk specifically about *Recorders*, what is that typology?**

*Recorders* are artworks that hear, see or feel the public and record and replay memories entirely obtained during the show. The pieces either depend on participation to exist or predatorily gather information on the public through surveillance and biometric technologies. The pieces are meant to oscillate between the seduction of participation, preservation and inclusion, and the violence of Orwellian and ubiquitous computerized detection. In all cases the artwork compiles a database of behaviours that then becomes the artwork itself. In most cases one must participate in order to see or hear an output.

#### **Will people feel uncomfortable, like they are being 'put on the spot'?**

Depends on the piece. Formulating a pre-eminent role for the spectator in an exhibition is a call to engagement, intimacy, personalization and agency, while simultaneously it is a policing, a loss of authorial and curatorial control, and the introduction of narcissistic cultures of endless self-representation. As critical distance, objectivity and voyeurism is not possible in this 'crowdsourced' show, it will hopefully displease those who believe art should be timeless and universal.

#### **Why do you want to displease?**

I want to displease those who have condescending and paternalistic attitudes towards the general public. Some

museums, artists, curators and critics secretly (and sometimes openly) assert that most visitors are morons, that their contribution should be limited to the gift shop. In my experience, giving responsibilities to the public is always rewarding, it is great to be surprised by what they come up with. I am ready for *Recorders* to be panned by art critics who will see the show as a set of pavlovian tests, as a science museum, or as a populist exercise, lacking sophistication. When you see the video portraits in the new installation *People on People* sure enough you will not get the masterful aesthetisation that Bill Viola, Gary Hill or Pipilotti Rist achieve, but what you gain is a sense of improvisation, of event, of projected absence, of art as process, with the process including the contemplation of – and therefore the participation in – the work itself. Even though the art of participation has been around for centuries, many critics can't get over the idea that a small elite should be able to dictate what is a worthwhile exploration.

#### **So in the realm of interactive art there is little room for the role of the artist, the curator, the critic?**

There is a lot of room! The artist derives a personal language from his or her nightmares, experiences, failures, influences, and then uses this to construct a platform, to improvise some constraints, to connect disparate realities, to materialize rich ambiguities. The curator becomes the host, creating a context for the work but also for the people, no longer so concerned with the preservation of the art object but with the perpetration of the cultural act. The critic becomes an empiricist, participating in the works and potentially embedding his or her own views so they become part of the artwork; also the critic can observe

*Levels of Nothingness* 2009.

Performance commissioned for the 50th Anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum. The human voice is analyzed by computers, automatically controlling a rig of Rock-and-Roll concert lighting and creating an interactive colour environment. Performed by Isabella Rossellini, libretto co-written with Brian Massumi. Photo: Kristopher McKay.



and relate the participation of others, a kind of comparative social anthropology upon which to base his or her apology, deconstruction, praise or dismissal.

**Is there the possibility of resistance? Can one hide from your work?**

I know that I am complicit with what I am denouncing: computer vision has built-in prejudices, exhibition spaces are never neutral, materializing surveillance just normalizes it, and so on. I work with technology not because it is new but because it is inevitable, a 'second-skin' as McLuhan would call it. So is it possible to resist technology? Well Pol Pot tried. No, technology is like a language that we cannot pretend is optional. Even if you live in a tiny village in remote Oaxaca and have never made a phone call, let alone seen a computer, your life is affected by global warming, your country is run on virtual capital, your language is about to disappear as more and more people seek to be connected with a handful of mainstream global languages. What we can do is pervert technology, to misuse it to create connective, critical or poetic experiences, to make evident its presence and the way it limits, expands or constructs our identities. As for hiding from my work, certainly it can be done by not participating, although all artworks in *Recorders* are pretty vampiric; *People on People* in particular will find and track you and record you no matter what...Your best bet is to wear a disguise!

**Is there a message that you seek to convey with these works?**

Not really any one message – in fact the whole notion of communication in art is very problematic and corporate. In my opinion good art slows down communication, adds

noise, intercepts and miss-translates messages, creates intricate silences...nothing that a telecom could derive a profit from. In *Recorders*, all the pieces are different and they are all experimental, in the sense that they are out of my control, uncensored and unmoderated. I am very curious to see what people will do. In *Recorders* Frank Stella's minimalist quip 'what you see is what you get' becomes 'what you give is what you get.'

Jacinta Laurent is a researcher currently living in Montreal. Her book on conceptual art *Test in the Head* is forthcoming.