

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

# Recorders



[RLH]



Timothy Druckrey

# Bodies, voices, pulses, traces, profanations...

*... all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.*<sup>1</sup>

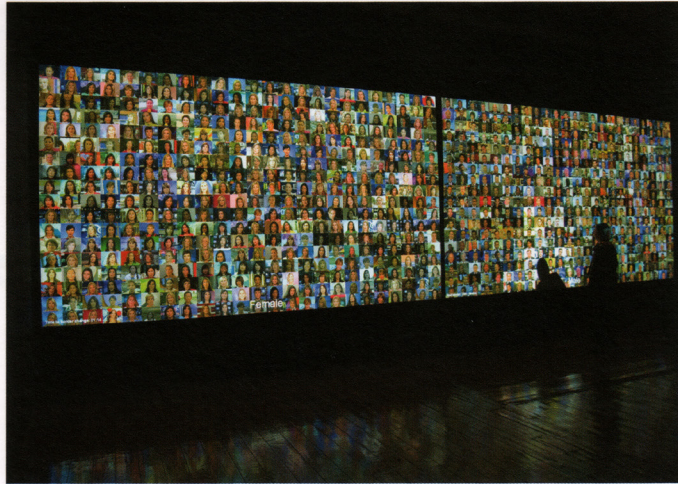
Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

I.

The history of the 'media arts' has come over-loaded with metaphors of 'life on the screen,' information revolution, the end of privacy, the loss of intimacy, the triumph of systems, the hype of the 'global village,' the virtualization of memory, the end of literature, etc., etc. How strange these characterizations seem in terms of the breath of works that have emerged in the last decades. From the outset, media art has evolved creative discourses and projects that have largely defined a relationship with communication, identity, intimacy, shattered narrative, and dematerialized social politics – from the alternative spaces of the 60s to the immateriality of cyberspace. This history, written in fits and starts, experiments, and interventions has provided an odd electronic hypothesis in which social fragmentation, nomadic identity, expert discourse, and information systems are linked with critical art practices ranging from critiques of simulation to the assimilation of technology into every aspect of social interaction.

Enveloped in the conditions of unremitting immediacy, mutable or schizoid selfhood, the illusions of social networks, or increasingly regressive 'publics' of the cybersphere, the challenge to the 'media arts' is as much to confront extant and emerging change (or better as Alvin Toffler called it, the 'premature arrival of the future') as it is to abandon inert, rhetorical, solipsistic, and often essentialist observer-based models (whose effectiveness seems less and less relevant) for adaptable systems in which the shifting terrains of social discourse (as it is circumscribed by technology industries), subjectivities (as they are extended by 'personalized' digital communications), embodiments (as they are prostheticized), or 'publics' (as the crumbling

*Pulse Park* 2008.  
Vital signs of the public control 200  
theatrical spotlights that illuminate  
the oval lawn at Madison Square  
Park, New York City.  
Photo: James Ewing.



*Reporters with Borders* 2008. Interactive display that simultaneously shows 864 video clips of news anchors taken from TV broadcasts in the United States and Mexico; as the viewer stands in front of the piece the reporters begin to talk. Every 5 minutes the piece switches the video clips and classifies them along gender, race and country. Haunch of Venison Gallery, London.

of local spheres are de-spatialized into zones of pseudo-consensus), emerge as signifiers of creative transformations in which 'stability' is disentangled from stasis or immutability and superseded by contingent and situational conditions whose drive is not towards fulfillment or resolution but towards more immediate and/or circumstantial consequences or contingent events.

This conditional sphere has been shadowing the arts for more than a century and as much fueled the historical avant-garde as it did Actionism, Happenings, Situationism, Land Art, Performance, etc., and drives the current frenzy of festivals, biennales, social networks and, particularly, a 'media art' freed of any real dependence on crumbling institutions to frame or legitimate it. It is clear that for some time contingency has prevailed in supplanting the 'stability' of the 'commodity aesthetic' haunting an art scene largely unprepared for a serious art to emerge without its sanction (though occasionally with its reticent or farcical assent).

If we have learned anything from within the media art scene in the last decades, it is that communication media have radically altered the closed-system of critical expertise that so limits institutional thinking. And it has done so without succumbing to the vague populism that so many feared and it has done so by provoking and expanding the conditions in which aesthetic activity can take place and it has done so by mastering technologies in ways that defy facile solutions and by probing not the centrality of artistic identity but rather by probing its limit conditions, not by the mere restaging of an often solipsistic system but by embracing machines (and networks) engineered for sheer functionality and by reimagining and refunctioning them in the service of the imagination.

Interrogating machines, information processing, digital reproducibility, individual autonomy, the 'legitimation crisis' of post-modernity's inebriation with broken narratives, the phony digital triumphs of Hollywood cinema, the now incessant remixing of history, the dismantling of expertise in favor of blogs or tweets and meta-commentary, the eradication of judgment in favour of blathering opinion, the very conditions of the social, the 'media arts' have, time and again, shattered naïve expectations or glib criticism. In its place we find critical activities aimed less and less toward the fulfillment of grandiose phantasies of the deathless electronic life of 'new media', and more and more an examination of the expanded boundaries of perceptibility, the exploded margins of mere representation, the possibilities not of the virtual but of the unimagined, the uncanny, the necessity of the marginal, the resistance to the faux delights of consumption in the face of an avalanche of 'newness' as the special effect par excellence, and a reinvigorated sense of aesthetic activities outside of the hallowed institution and back in the old – but reimagined – public sphere!

## II.

*I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses, of living beings. Not only therefore prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth ... but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigation, computers, cellular phones, and, why not, language itself, which is perhaps, the most ancient of apparatuses – one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured,*

1000 Platitudes 2003.

A large-scale photographic project featuring the world's brightest projection on a 12-ton truck and a diesel generator. HUMO workshop with Brian Massumi, V2 Rotterdam and AEC Linz.



*probably without realizing the consequences that he was about to face.*<sup>2</sup>

If we follow Agamben's argument in *What is an Apparatus?*, we learn that 'apparatuses must always imply a process of subjectification' and continues, 'that is to say, they must produce their subject.' Yet Agamben also sees the intricate link between subjectification and desubjectification as he laments the influence of gadgets and particularly the cell phone: 'a desubjectifying moment is certainly implicit in every process of subjectification' (p.20) as he identifies 'two great classes 'beings' and 'apparatuses' and 'between these two, as a third class, subjects.' (p14). This triad – being → subject → apparatus – constitutes the tortured metaphysics of the contemporary. Agamben sees the 'subject' as 'that which results from the relation and, so to speak, relentless fight between living beings and apparatuses' and proposes 'hand-to-hand combat with apparatuses' by means of 'profanation' ... 'to profane' (in the Classic sense) he proposes, is 'to restore the thing to the free use of men' and thus 'profanation is the counter-apparatus'(19)<sup>3</sup>, the measure of resistance to complicity or assimilation.

A curious cautionary tale whose complexities are increasingly hard to resist as 'smart' technologies envelop, monitor, regulate – but also one that stubbornly clings to both a static reading of the apparatus and that forgets that the entire history of modernity has precisely to do with mediated experiences the consequences of which – as Agamben himself acknowledges by positing language itself as the archetypal apparatus – form the core of an entire history of the role of representation.

Yet Agamben is hardly the first to enjoin on the aversion

towards the effects of the apparatus. Heidegger, Mumford, Ellul, Kittler, and many others have lamented the losses wrought by the capitulation to technique and its apparatuses. Heidegger's 'a representation ... is not being,' Mumford's 'magnificent bribe,' Ellul's 'technological bluff,' Kittler's age of 'nonsense', form a chorus of opposition to the reverberations of the 'triumph of technique'. Indeed Virilio, choral master of this mourning, urges that 'we must at least resolve ourselves to losing the sense of our senses .. ready to lose our morphological illusions about physical dimensions ...which, in the electronic interface, affect the order of sensations' a condition where 'the absence of any immediate perception of concrete reality produces a terrible imbalance between the sensible and the intelligible.'<sup>4</sup>

Losses, bribes, bluffs, nonsense, imbalances ... these stark diagnostic metaphors do come as serious considerations and yet also come as resistant to the forms of transformation, mobility, and agency of media culture and that too often flounder in clearly distinguishing between the apparatus, the medium, the interface and the culture that has rapidly propagated and thrives in an unimagined electronic sphere that has shattered the conventions of modernity's nostalgia for stability and equilibrium.

The 'prognosticators' of these transformations come from broad arenas. Norbert Wiener realized that 'Every instrument in the repertoire of the scientific instrument maker can become a sense organ,' Marshall McLuhan that 'Our Age of Anxiety is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools and yesterday's concepts,'<sup>5</sup> Henk Oosterling that 'Within this mode of being – actual and virtual at the same time – presence and absence are

Voz Alta 2008.

A megaphone converts voices into light flashes and a synchronized FM radio signal. Memorial for the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre, commissioned by UNAM university, Mexico City.



no longer oppositions... Life has become very excessive, even ecstatic. In spite of infrastructural immobilizations like traffic-jams, terrorist threats, tsunamis or physical and digital viruses, our mobility has become part of our selves (auto). The very essence of global consumers is becoming Aristotle's Demiurgos...,<sup>6</sup> and Peter Weibel said it most cogently: 'Non-identity, context, interactivity, observer, have replaced identity, text, closure, author. That this heroic art of the apparatus world meets with resistance and protest, even though it has founded the logic of the modernity to which it adheres, can only be explained by the ideological ban motivated by man's fears of the void created in modern civilization and modern art by the autonomy of the machine and the disappearance of a familiar reality.'<sup>7</sup>

For our purposes, the most significant shift lies within the implications of 'realities' that are increasingly open-ended, contingent and perhaps unconditional – what might be called anti-chronological, or perhaps suspended, events that disappoint succession, events that are anti-illusionistic, events that emerge in a kind of Deleuzian 'crystallization' but one in which the classical movement/time reciprocity is less relevant than formulations of event flows expressed in elided, compressed, relativised, disintegrated, probablized, indeterminate, subversive, unstable, asynchronous events that are a mix of succession, reversibility and differentiated agency.

Instead we can be confronted by an array of 'temporalities' engaged with the interrogation of systems that defy the normative flows of representability. Here, we are urged not merely to experience banal phenomenal time, but rather to engage in behaviors, assess momentary conditions,

interfere with stasis, investigate the instantaneous states of information, probe transitory visibilities, survey the cumulative and relative structures of the archive, measure the effects of presence, consider indeterminate identities, examine the decay of memory, inspect or direct the 'flow' of the event, dissect the repercussions of infinitesimal fluctuations, scrutinize the representation of codes, reflect on seemingly inert systems of surveillance, scan – and perhaps synchronize with – tidal streams of images, experience 'unstable' event-atmospheres. And what emerges in this event-interface, or this in-between, is not the sheer (and paradoxical) stasis of a modernity riveted by speed and resistant to assimilating change, but the unleashing of contingent experiences unburdened by the losses, bluffs, bribes, or imbalances that attempted to sustain the bleak illusion that we've been swindled into inhabiting some phony world that has no substance, no subjectivity, or no meaning.

III.

*Theatre is an assembly where the people become aware of their situation and discuss their own interests, Brecht will say after Piscator: Theatre is the ceremony where the community is given the possession of its own energies, Artaud will state. If theatre is put as an equivalent of the true community, the living body of the community opposed to the illusion of the mimesis, it comes as no surprise that the attempt at restoring Theatre in its true essence takes place on the very background of the critique of the spectacle.*<sup>8</sup>

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's oeuvre is a sweeping interrogation of the 'inevitable' assimilation of representation and experience into the unilateral circuits of globalization.



*Homographies 2006.*  
A turbulent array of 144 motorized fluorescent light tubes responds to the movement of the public.  
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney Biennale.

Resolutely working in a kind of 'anti-illusion', his work is no longer dependent on primitive modes of recognition or reflexivity. Instead, the works tackle a far more cunning reversal by integrating the 'interference' of the public as the vital dynamic in anti-spectacle, anti-narrative and as an abandonment of the 'regime' of illusions.

The successive works in this exhibition posit the interface as more than just a portal into spectacle; they stand against that kind of phantasmagoria in favour of developing a unique relationship with a distributed public without losing sight of either identity, locality, or with the delicate meanings of interactivity. These works reclaim public space as a site of public discourse, of the social imaginary, of the 'projection' of the public will, and constitute actions at once defiant and compelling.

To 'write' into the edifices of buildings that stand as a repository of cultural history (*People on People*), to 'write' the body into the 'social text' of the physical world (*33 Questions*), to leave the trace of a fingerprint (*Pulse Index*), a heartbeat (*Pulse Room*), a voice (*Microphones*), a face (*Close-up Shadow Box*) propose cumulative meanings that, on the one hand, embed these works in specific – and individual – histories, and, on the other, inhabits them with the bodies, voices, pulses, traces, and profanations of participants willing to suspend passivity and expect more than seeing the mere effect of their individual actions.

In this sense, Lozano-Hemmer is neither attempting to 'build' consensus or to conjure up a useless interaction. Instead the works are an evocation of the kind of social space in which active participation is not a by-product, but the driving force in the creation of a dynamic agora in which

every position is established in an open system that ruptures hierarchies and dismantles the notion that the public is an undifferentiated mass, the media merely the harbinger of a utopian global village, interactivity just another opiate for on-line shoppers.

In carefully balancing expansive spaces with individual actions, the works that have been developed by Lozano-Hemmer conspire to reverse-engineer the looming, phantasmatical or cultish extravaganzas whose effects were created to overwhelm the senses, to evoke false unity, or to provide a backdrop for mob rallies. Instead, he relinquishes the crowd in favour of the assembly. The work reminds us that our social spaces are never neutral, that they are inhabited by memories of all sorts, that contingency is not inconsequential, that we are not static, forgotten, stripped-bare by databases, lost in a desubjectified electronic miasma, unable to know what is 'sensible' or 'intelligible.'

Rather than an enclave, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer posits the shared experience as an arena, a social theatre for 'emancipated spectators' in a real 'imagined community.'

1. Benedict Andersen, *Imagined Communities*, (Verso, New York, 1983) p.15.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2009) p. 14.
3. Agamben, pp. 20, 14, 19.
4. Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (Semiotext[e], New York, 1991) pp. 48, 52, 31.
5. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An inventory of Effects* (Random House, New York, 1967) p.87.
6. Henk Osterling, *Radical Medi@crity* (published on nettime, 2005). Unpaginated.
7. Peter Weibel, "The Apparatus World – A World into Itself" in *Eigenwelt der Apparate – Welt: Pioneers of Electronic Art* (Ars Electronica, Linz, 1992). p.23.
8. Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (ArtForum. FindArticles.com. 01 Aug, 2010. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_7\\_45/ai\\_n24354915/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_45/ai_n24354915/)) unpaginated.