under scan

by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Interview with
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Nadja Mounajjed

Nadja Mounajjed: Did *Under Scan* turn out as you expected? Did you get the interaction you were aiming for?

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: The only thing that can be predicted about interaction in public space is that there will always be a very wide range of behaviours: some people spent half an hour interacting with the installation, some 10 seconds; some would come in big groups and reveal portraits together, others would just walk alone and have a quiet experience; some found it fun, while others found it frightening or perverse. We had all sorts of participants in the installation, from vintage punk-rockers to members of the "Army of Christ,"—even though it sounds cliché, we had people of all ages, classes and ethnic groups. In addition, the piece changed a lot depending on the city, the time of night, the day of the week, and so on. Typically we would see a lot of people come during the weekends and this made the environment more festive; during weekdays it would be calmer and often people would run into the installation as they went home from the office or had to go across town to do some shopping or go to the pub.

It often took people a while to figure out that the portraits were interactive. But it was preferable in my opinion to have them discover this interaction rather than having someone tell them what to do. I think some people were expecting that the portraits would appear in their shadow wherever they were standing. But I conceived the project specifically so that people had to promenade in the space and walk toward the portraits, which would appear in their path, rather than the portraits chasing after the public. I am happy with this decision even if the other way may have been easier to understand or more fun.

NM: How were the sites chosen? In Lincoln I talked to people who wondered why it was located outside the city centre.

RLH: The site had to be a large area with many pedestrians and without car traffic; for projection, we needed the ground to be even and with a light-coloured tone. Finally, the commission's aim was to highlight the new cultural quarters of cities in the East Midlands so that's where we looked for locations. In Lincoln the site at the University was chosen mostly because all the other large public spaces had a very dark cobblestone, which is an extremely difficult surface to

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project on. In Nottingham the perfect site would have been Old Market Square but it was being renovated during our tour so the alternative Canal Side site was quite picturesque but a bit out of the way.

NM: Did the site affect the feedback you got from participants?

RLH: Sure. I think people enjoyed the project more when they just encountered it in their normal activities in town, as a surprise. If the site was further away then often people would go there expecting some kind of son-et-lumière show or a fireworks display, and they would be disappointed because *Under Scan* was not a cathartic spectacle. I like to think of my work as being closer to landscaping in a park, or to a public fountain, than to a pre-programmed show.
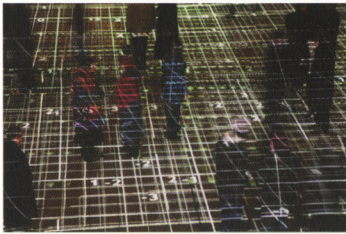
NM: In my interviews I found that many people actually preferred the interlude light animation shown every 7 minutes rather than interacting with portraits. In almost every interview I heard "I liked when the lights shut down and the grids show on the ground." Do you have an explanation for this?

RLH: Yes, that was a really big surprise for me! Originally I expected the exact opposite: I thought the interlude was going to be this scary moment when all of the tracking mechanisms would be revealed, creating an Orwellian environment that would make people aware that they were being scanned with predatorial technology. I wanted something that would break the game of representation, like in a Brecht play when all the actors stop suddenly and say "wait, this is only a play" and thus make people aware of themselves, of the theatre, of the whole artificiality of the construct. Instead, every time the grids came out people laughed and ran and often danced.

I think this happened because interacting with the portraits turned out to be quite an eerie experience, — where someone you don't know was in your shadow making eye contact and maybe sending you kisses or waving or trying to tell you something or frowning at you. The portraits had a lot of power, they had agency, and they could be quite invasive. But during the interlude people were relieved from that gaze, they instead related to one another, to a more familiar situation. This is one of the things that I love about developing this kind of artwork: the piece is really out of my control and I can't predict how people will end up experiencing it.

NM: In *Under Scan,* you used the video-portrait as a visual stimulus to produce interaction. Can you tell us a bit more on how the idea came about?

RLH: In 2001 I did a project called *Body Movies* where people could reveal still, photographic portraits within their shadow projected on a wall. The portraits were "every day"

The interlude lighting sequence revealed the tracking mechanism every 7 minutes.

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people taken on the streets by a team of photographers. The installation was very successful because passers-by would basically "animate" the stills by moving around and gesticulating. But I felt that the portraits did not have agency, they could not look back and be active. So *Under Scan* is an attempt to make the interactive experience more bi-directional. The people portrayed in *Under Scan* knew exactly what the project was about and they were free to do anything they wanted to self-represent as long as at one point they made eye contact with the camera. Portraiture is a direct way of acting out identity. For me it is crucial to refer to it as "acting," because self-representation done in a conscious way can be very theatrical and unnatural. I was interested in phantasmagorias, or ghost-like presences that would react to people in an intimate way.

NM: Why did you not use sound?

RLH: There have been some great interactive portraits by Luc Courchesne, Lynn Hershman, Tony Dove, Sharon Grace and others that talk back to you. One problem is that if portraits can talk it is reasonable to expect them to listen and understand you, and this level of simulation is not what I am good at. Plus, for *Under Scan*, playback would have been a problem because what would work is for the sound to originate at the projection itself and technologically this was not easy to solve. In art history, except for the examples I just mentioned, portraits seldom talk. So in this case they didn't either. This added a certain distance, highlighting the ghost-like qualities of the project, the fact that this piece is in a way about loneliness. When people were portrayed you got this sense of the desire to communicate: some were doing sign language, others pulled out little cards with writing on them, others are speaking very slowly so that you can read their lips, and I like that, it is as though they are trying to bridge the distance that the piece creates. Of course this failure to communicate was often intensely poetic.

NM: What I find particularly interesting in your work is the way you approach the interface. It seems to me that there is an attempt in your work to look at the interface beyond its technical dimension and more into the conceptual level, can you tell me more about this?

RLH: The interface is central to interactive art because it is the platform for participation. I don't like to think of the interface as a window between two worlds—the view of it as inputs and outputs between the virtual and the real—but rather as a place where disparate realities co-exist and often relate. I tend to prefer intuitive or self-evident interfaces that just disappear and don't need too much explanation, like a shadow. This adds theatricality to the pieces because already people have a sophisticated vocabulary of what can be done with a shadow. At the same time, I like to always have a Brechtian

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moment where the simulations stop and people are asked to confront the mechanism for the deceit,—the periodic "interlude sequence" in the case of *Under Scan*.

NM: Is it fair to say that *Under Scan* is an elitist work? Some people found it to be too complicated technically and others felt that the public information panels with historical references were too dense. Do people need to be familiar with Plato to fully engage in the work?

RLH: Reading Plato is absolutely not essential for the work. I saw 5 year-olds enjoying the piece and that makes me happy because to me an artwork should have multiple entry points: it should be able to appeal on different levels to different people. My decision to state philosophical and artistic precedents is because I like to connect the piece to debates and experiments that have been going on for ages. I don't like to emphasise that the work is "new" but rather the idea of ongoing research. If people don't care about research that's fine with me too, and I believe the work can engage on other levels.

NM: I also felt children were amongst the most engaged participants, they just go there and they experiment with it instinctively.

RLH: Exactly! Children have fewer reservations in a social context. As we get older we are taught to maintain a physical and psychological space around people: if I am too close to you, you will be uncomfortable because you want your "living space": people go out of their way to maintain that *lebensraum*. *Under Scan* challenges this concept of *lebensraum* because you are over the person in the video portrait and that is quite charged politically, socially and sexually. So this makes adults feel very uncomfortable. Children don't have that to the same extent. They are like: "oh, there is somebody. I am going up to them!"

NM: In your work, is there a particular perception or representation of the body you are trying to explore?

RLH: I am interested in the body as a performance,— as a process of becoming, of change—and less interested in physiognomy, anatomy, forensics or physical ergonomics. I have worked a lot with choreographers and dancers and I am sensitive to the idea that a body is always out of balance, always in motion, even when it is static. When people uncover a portrait they align themselves to it and there is a certain puppetry that ensues, an embodiment of the representation. But this embodiment is in a dynamic equilibrium, where the actors are suspended in an artificial dependency. If people don't use their body to match the representations, these disappear.

NM: Does that also go further to question the relationship with architecture and the environment?

RLH: That is different. I have a cursory interest in architecture, especially when it involves utilitarian issues of permanence, symbolism or style. But if architecture is understood more widely as comprising the architecture of social relations, of surveillance, of fleeting exceptions, then count me in. I have often said that my work is not "site-specific" but rather "relationship-specific." Contrary to many artists working in public space I am not trying to understand or criticise the underlying political, aesthetic or historical structures of a specific building, but rather I am seeking to explore the temporary micro-politics of relationships that emerge in an environment that dissimulates being something other than itself. That is why most of my pieces tour. I always look forward to seeing how the same platform will behave in a new architectural context.

NM: What is the potential for relationships between physical architecture and the virtual dimension?

RLH: I think every architect working today considers electronic media to be as fundamental and as inevitable as, say, an elevator. The impact that elevators had on architecture is evident, but what is or will be the impact of media? Hopefully not the so-called "intelligent buildings" that have been designed since the seventies! When architects speak of intelligent buildings they mean using climate control subsystems that save energy, or fuzzy logic algorithms for the efficient dispatch of elevators, or surveillance technologies that track occupants, and so on. As artist Emilio López-Galiacho noted, this intelligence is always towards the inside of the building and deployed in order to optimise worker output. My hope is that we can see what media theorist Derrick de Kerckhove calls "connective intelligence" and can ask ourselves how a building can be connected to the outside, to people, to other buildings, to other stories. Clearly, at any given point disparate realities coexist and I think there are some fascinating architects and artists who are working in interfacing these. The field of architecture is evolving into understanding itself as a processor of all these different connections.

NM: One final question: You previously talked a lot in your work about memory. Was memory present in *Under Scan* in particular?

RLH: Yes! Many years ago I read Francis Yates' "The Art of Memory" and really got into Giulio Camillo, Giordano Bruno, and the idea of memory as a place. But *Under Scan* was specifically not mnemonic: I decided that the portraits should be able to appear anywhere within the public space and in a way that was not repeatable. A video portrait captured a sequence in time, which in fact became a memory in our database; this memory was activated by passers-by who

then shared an experience with a presence from another time. The memories were perpetrated, not preserved, as they played back differently depending on how they were triggered and engaged. Of course the reading is very different if it is a family triggering the portrait or a policeman or the recorded person himself or herself (which was very uncanny thing to see, by the way). The singularity comes not from the memory but from the way it is read and by whom.

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