the PERPETRATION of the CULTURAL ACT

> Abigail Susik, Assistant Professor of Art History, Willamette University

THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION TOOK PLACE ON WEDNESDAY, MAY 1, 2013, IN THE MONTREAL STUDIO OF ELECTRONIC INSTALLATION ARTIST RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER. [1] FOR THE LAST TWO DECADES, LOZANO-HEMMER HAS PIONEERED THE GROWTH OF INTERACTIVE DIGITAL ART IN A VARIETY OF INTERNET AND 3-D APPROACHES THAT FOSTER PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, CIVIC DEBATE, AND COLLECTIVE PLAY. THE DISCUSSION WITH ABIGAIL SUSIK FOCUSED UPON LOZANO-HEMMER'S INTEREST IN RESPONSIVE TECHNOLOGIES SUCH AS ROBOTICS AND ANIMATRONICS, AND THE WAY IN WHICH NEW MEDIA ART EVOKES THE TRADITIONAL AESTHETIC CONCEPTS OF 'MIMESIS' AND THE 'AUTONOMY OF THE ART OBJECT,' WHILE AT THE SAME TIME TRANSFORMING THESE CONCEPTS THROUGH A FOCUS ON THE 'OPEN ENDED EVENT.'

http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/

Susik: Do you think that in some capacity there remains in your work an inherent aesthetic desire to recreate or re-present life, along the lines of a classical aesthetic idea of mimesis, or what might be called representational imitation? Could we say that the illusion of sentience or responsiveness of the artwork that is exhibited in some new media art is a kind of mimesis?

Lozano-Hemmer: It is a desire, in my opinion, not so much to recreate life, but to recreate the conditions of possibility of the uncertain and the uncontrollable. The most important thing in many of my pieces is the idea that they are out of my control. That often gets materialized in two ways. On the one hand, there are either emergent or chaotic A-life agencies in the works, so that there is a sense of the artwork making its own decisions. Or, there are provisions for the public to personalize, take over the piece and push it into the direction that they desire through self-representation.

In both of those cases, the artist establishes a field or platform. "Platform" is a good word because it is not a territory, per se, but rather a set of constraints. The artwork is a set of constraints that are decided upon: what is permitted and not permitted. The life that you are seeking to engender is not so much the life of the artwork, but the life of the event, which is a collaboration between the artwork and the public.

S: In your case, therefore, the life of the artwork might be much less a question of mimesis than a drive aiming to upset hegemonic structures between producer, produced and receiver? In such a scenario, would you say it is neither the work of art nor the receiver that possesses privilege–in terms of agency or autonomy? Rather, the agency of the artwork resides in this mutual process of exchange which is open ended?

LH: Yes. However, although the exchange of the artwork is open ended, it is not neutral. For instance, oftentimes I feel that my works are trying to elicit interaction from people who I feel are

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http://median.newmediacaucus.org/art-infrastructures-information/the-perpetration-of-the-cultural-act-interview-with-rafael-lozano-hemmer/

underrepresented, or who experience a sense of alienation. I want to create artworks that allow such individuals, through self-representation, to possess the gesture of legitimation offered by art practices, through the questioning of public space and their relationship with a community.

Yet there are other times, equally frequent, where I find that people are too entitled, and there is a need to create experiences that are intensely critical, which underline the ways in which technologies are imbued with prejudices. So, I oscillate between making pieces that have an intense sense of inclusion, intimacy and relationship—and pieces that are predatory, Orwellian and dramatic.

S: What would you say are the hallmarks of a media-based work of art, new media if you will, that is critical and not just commercial? Do you think there needs to be some concrete criteria for the category of critical new media art?

LH: There must be criteria. One issue, for instance, is this idea of the communication of information. Another is the idea of new. All these three things, communication, information and the new are involved in the same kind of language of mostly corporate solutions to try to optimize our interaction—as if we needed technology to make our communication better, for example.

Artwork has nothing to do with communication. There is zero interest in that. In fact the artworks that I am drawn to are specifically very good at complexifying information, fostering ambiguity, and creating a set of questions. They embody a

passionate uselessness. Such works are not utilitarian devices operating to create a particular effect, but rather, are a set of questions, or a poem. I know that sounds ridiculous, but like a poem, art can be a metaphor for this intense structure that generates multiple readings . . . Oftentimes I think that my worst artworks are those I call 'one bit interesting'—where you say, "oh, cute; I get it." So much of contemporary art, not just media art, but contemporary art in general, is a kind of neat trick. I find that fraudulent. I think the artwork needs to have layers and loose ends. Not even the artist him or herself can know where that loose end will lead.

Francis Bacon said that we won't know what good art is until forty years after the artist dies. I like this idea that we are trying to make a contribution to a language that we don't understand, that we are fumbling with the device. Contrary to science, contrary to the sign, contrary to technology, we benefit from an approach that is not teleological. In other words, we approach art as something that is going to become, not something that is.

S: Returning to this idea of mimesis, then, or the endeavor to create the lifelike in art, and the process of open ended exchange that you mentioned, would you say that your works are therefore something like experimental prototypes, prototypes open to, or even calling for, ongoing developmental change?

LH: All prototypes are materializations of the process of an artwork . . . I find that in media art, because it is event based, you cannot get out of the prototyping stage until you have exhibited and the piece has

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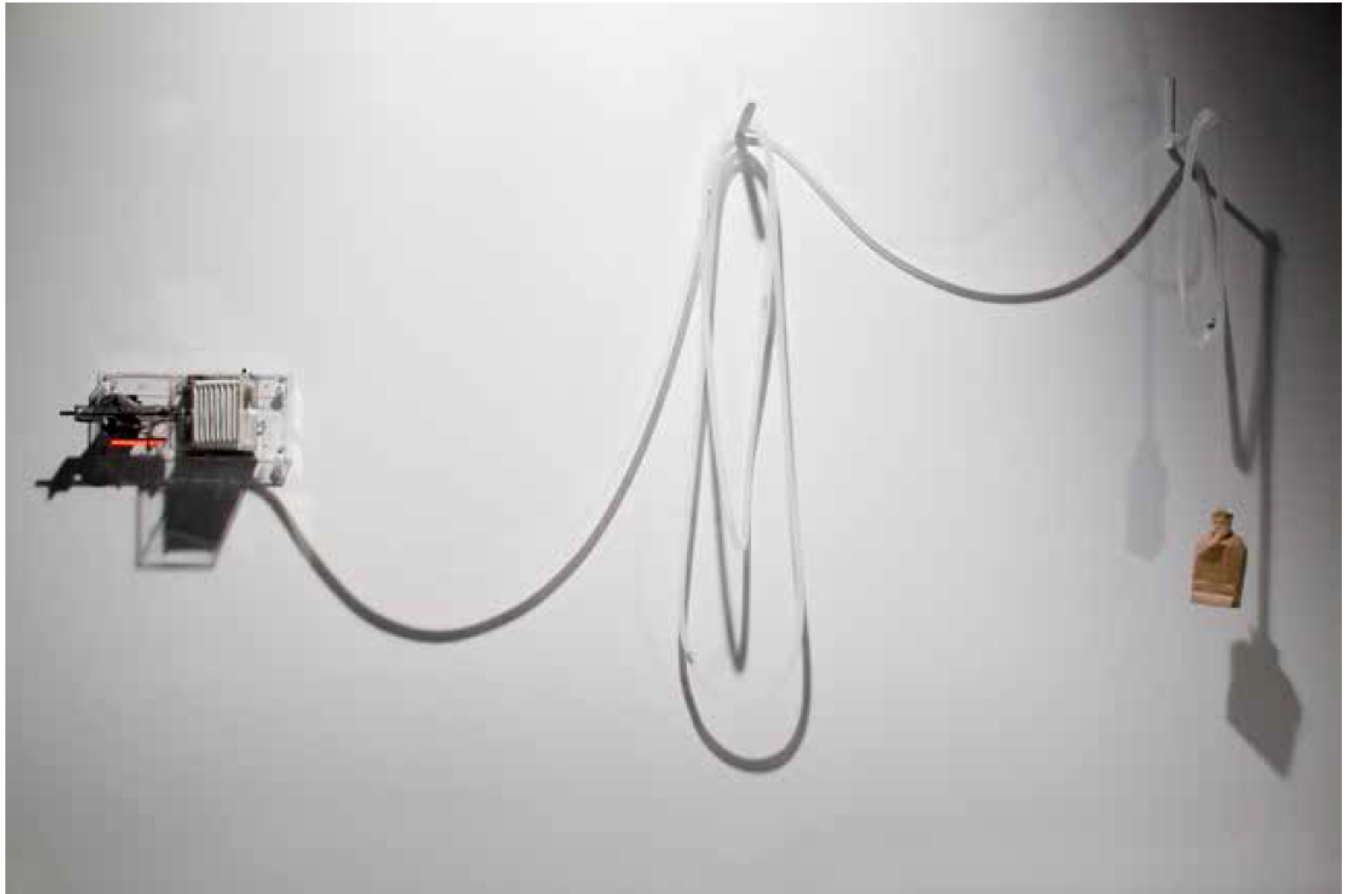
matured and related to different kinds of people . . . This comes in clash with more conservative ideas of what art should be—this attitude that we need to establish a moment when the artwork is fixed. There is great irony in the notion of trying to fix something which is out of control by definition. I have always been enamored by ephemerality as a way to ensure that the projects do not have that fixed signification. Now that my work is in collections, I have approached a different sort of idea: to preserve the agency and the perfor-mativity of the project, what I call the *perpetration* of the cultural act instead of the preservation.

S: Then, is it more important for you that the work of art itself has autonomy from maker/audience, or, on the other hand, that the audience/receivers pos-sess their own agency in relation to the work of art?

LH: It depends on the project. For instance, if a project has content that is crowd sourced, I want to make sure that the public has agency. In that sense there is no such thing as autonomy for the artwork because the artwork is completely and absolutely dependent on the content.

A good example is my piece *Last Breath* (2012). *Last Breath* is a biometric portrait, and as a portrait, there are a number of decisions being made by me, including who gets to be in that machine. It is a conflict, the question of representation itself—there is conflict in the act of choosing your subject. In this work, I am portraying an 85-year old singer from Cuba with the idea that, after she dies, and after I die certainly, this machine will continue circulating her breath through the system. It is a romantic idea of autonomy, the autonomy of representation, as if this biometric portrait could in fact some-how mysteriously capture the essence of somebody as magical as she is. So the autonomy in that artwork, at least, is intended to be technically implicit.

That same piece has another, more interactive version called *Vicious Circular Breathing* (2013). That piece is interactive to the degree that the air inside of the brown paper bags is the air that has already been breathed by

Last Breath, 2012, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, motor, bellows, plexiglass, digital display, custom circuitry, arduino processor, respiration tubing, brown paper bags, apparatus 60 x 27.5 x 23 cm, tube up to 15 m long, Fundación Telefónica, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2012. Photo by: Antimodular Research. ©Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

all the people who have visited the piece. In that sense I don't see any kind of agency for the public. The work is instead like a prison of some sort.

Sometimes instead of submission to the work of art, rejection is the right approach to some of these projects. For me it is a very beautiful moment when someone rejects participating in this artwork. In this case I think Henk Oosterling's notion of co-presence is interesting. Presence and absence are not mutually exclusive. Who is the observer, who is the observed, and which other people are present at this time? What other realities at any given time inform and contaminate and even though they are not co-present?

S: Does the media artwork therefore tend toward spectacle for you, in the sense that it can imprison the viewer and require either submission or rejection? If your pieces are out of your control, does that mean they are often instead "in control"?

LH: The question of voyeurism, spectacle and proscenium is now, in my opinion, less valid. The viewer him or herself is an active participant in the act of perception. According to Heisenberg, we cannot see something without changing it. These are also very old ideas in art. Marcel Duchamp said, "le regard fait le tableau." If it is indeed the look that makes a painting, then all of this desire for an artwork that is

objective, universal or independent, is of no interest.

S: Then what is your opinion of the pervasiveness of projection technologies, in which the subject and object can now merge into a fused spectacle of artificial image? How can we change the image if we are the image?

LH: I am often asked, "Why do you work with new technologies"? I reply, because it is inevitable. The language of globalization, technology, permeates every level of human practice.

We already wear projections. Everything from fashion, to identity politics, to language itself—attitude, gender constructions, architecture, public space, public surveillance—all of these things inform how we project ourselves in space. Additional layering will just highlight what is already evident: identity itself is a performance. The idea that identity is artificial, there is nothing natural about that. By that I don't mean something negative, it is just inevitable. There is no such thing as natural. These are all projections.

Dissimulation is a word that I have always used in relation to the desire for the "suspension of disbelief" in art. Rather than suspend belief, I always wanted to stop believing, wake up, and look at the real world. . . . And yet buildings covered in media facades, for instance, are trying to pretend to

be something other than themselves. And there is merit to that. There is merit to the shared acknowledgement of complicity with a system that is, by definition, artificial. This is best described by the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque is, according to Bakhtin, a moment of interruption in the normal narratives of power. In public space you take on roles, you give performances, you interrupt the rules of representation, and that is liberation. I think we need this liberation, and that we will also begin to see it more and more frequently.

REFERENCES
1. This Mellon-funded interview was assisted by Emma Jonas, and transcribed by Madeline Mendez Packer and Alyson Croney. Interview material informed the following publication: Abigail Susik, "Mimesis, Coding, Programming: Considerations on the Meta-Image and the Microcontroller in New Media Art," *Meta- and Inter-Images in Contemporary Visual Art and Culture*, ed. Carla Taban (Leuven University Press, 2013). 281-97.

BIO
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