Interview for Felix, by Priamo Lozada

For the past few years you have been working on a series of works entitled "Relational Architecture". How would you define this body of work?

"Relational Architecture" can be defined as the technological actualization of public space with "alien" memory. I prefer to say "alien" instead of "new", because the word does not have the pretension of originality and simply underlines the fact that the memory "does not belong". The series consists of large-scale interventions that allow local or remote participants to transform buildings or urban landscapes through sensors, networks, robots and audiovisual technologies. The installations tend to be ephemeral although they could become permanent if a budget and context allow it.

I named the series "Relational Architecture" in large part because I wanted to avoid using the term "interactivity". This word has now become too vague, like "postmodern", "virtual", "deconstruction" or other terms that mean too many things and is exhausted. Duchamp said "the look makes the picture" and when we say that everything is interactive, the word is not that interesting anymore. Also interactive sounds too much like a top-down 1-bit trigger button —you push it 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 studies of the brain and also the word has been used since the 60s to describe cross-referencing databases. The great Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, precursors of electronic art, also used the term in the 60s to refer to their user-activated objects and installations. "Relational" has a more horizontal quality, it's more connective: events happen in fields of activity that may have resonances in several places in the network. The word "relational" takes you away from this discrete, personalized, individualized experience of interactivity, which I dislike.

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, represent 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 is 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.

Where do you situate the participant in these pieces? How do you propose and resolve their participation? Is the end result close to your initial ideas regarding participation?

I draw very careful distinctions between my interventions in public space and the work of artists that I admire very much —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". I am more interested in temporary, minor histories that can be established with new relationships that may emerge between the site and the public. Therefore I call my work "relationship specific". The grounding is not the history or symbolism of the site, but the participation of the public. Without the public the piece cannot unfold, it cannot exist: it would be like a play without actors. For me, a piece is successful if the behaviours and relationships that arise from participation manage to surprise the artist/designer...in other words, the outcomes should not have been pre-programmed. Instead, the piece should establish 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.

My recent piece "Body Movies" consisted of 1200 square metres of projected interactive portraits that passers-by would reveal by casting their shadow onto the Pathé cinema building in Rotterdam. I was inspired by Van Hoogstraten's and 17th century Dutch shadow plays, but these "site specific" references are really only entry points into the work. Almost every culture in the world has a very sophisticated vocabulary and tradition of shadow plays or shadow mythologies. 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 am currently organizing a tour for Body Movies and I am really looking forward to seeing how people's reaction differs in Seoul, Sao Paulo or Singapore. I think in most electronic artworks what's interesting is the cross-reference of different behaviours that arise from showing in different settings.

Many times my work derives from an existing special effect. Sometimes it's more historically motivated, occasionally it comes from the research of an interface. I have 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 is more dialogical, something that is more of an exchange.

What is your background? How do you decide to make art?

My family in Mexico ran nightclubs and discotheques, where artists and musicians would hang out, like José Luis Cuevas or Pérez Prado. We moved to Spain when I was twelve and then I went to University in Canada when I was seventeen. I studied chemistry and art history in Montreal and, with some friends, started a group called PoMo CoMo doing experimental radio and technological performances. For about four years we toured several cities with up to 12 people and tiny budgets. From that group I ended up working only with Will Bauer, a composer engineer with whom I still collaborate. We first developed interactive

installations and then started the Relational Architecture series. While our work is no longer time-based, we still view the pieces as being closer to the performing arts than the visual arts.

For me it is a priority to create group experiences rather than to generate collectible objects. We emphasize artwork that is connective or social, in contrast to a lot of electronic art which features 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 can't 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 can't 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's more attractive is people meeting and sharing an experience, —a simple pleasure that composer Frederic Rzewski calls "coming together".

I would like to now focus on your production process. Could you tell us about the composition of your production team? What is the difference between working with new media as opposed to more traditional supports?

The production team varies from piece to piece, but it usually includes my long-standing collaborator Will Bauer and programmer Conroy Badger. Sometimes we work with writers, photographers, choreographers, architects, composers or whatever is required. For my piece at the Havana Biennial, which is an automated question-generator, we had several people working on linguistics, for example. Even when I am working on a project alone I still feel it is a collaboration because I am always aware that tools that I use are already encoded with the "personality" of its programmer/designer. One can say the same thing about language and ideas, as these arise from an uncontrollable social context. Creation is always a fluid dialog. The mode of cooperative conception that works for my production team is one derived from the performing arts: there is a director, actors, composers, and so on, everyone knows their role and is credited and paid accordingly.

I work with technology because it is impossible not to. Technology is one of the inevitable languages of globalisation. I like calling it a language because this conveys two attributes that are significant. Firstly, that technology is inseparable from contemporary identity, —there is no such thing as "what we were like before technology"—, and secondly that it is not something that has been invented or engineered, but rather that it has evolved through constantly-changing social, economic, physical and political forces. I think artists use technology explicitly as a way to understand and criticise from within some of the paradoxes of our culture. How can "media" culture actually result in disintermediation? How can a

condition of placelessness become situated as multi-place? How come telematics may actually remarginalize the periphery?

On the other hand, there is a tendency for "technologically correct" art, like critic Lorne Falk says, where artists, museums and galleries adopt technology not to create new experiences specific to the new media, but rather to leverage and validate their current grab-bag of metaculture. Many years ago I wrote an essay for Leonardo magazine called "Perverting Technological Correctness" where I outlined some strategies artists deploy to corrupt the inevitability of corporate technologies. Among them, I included the simulation of technology itself, the use of pain and embodiment, ephemeral intervention, misuse of technology, non-digital approaches to virtuality and resistance to what I call the "effect" effect.

Anyhow, I grew up on four hours of television a day. For me Painting is new media!