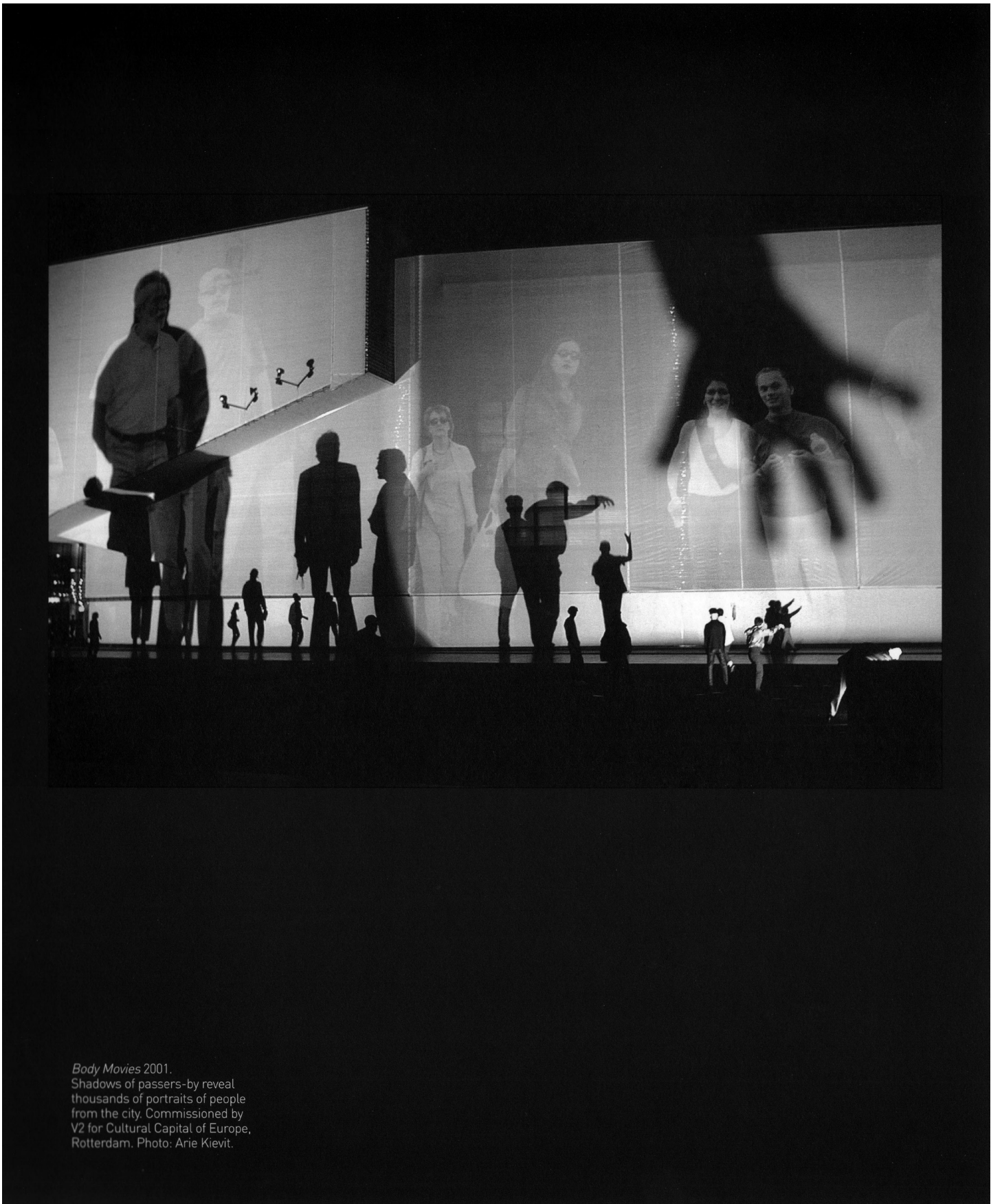


Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Recorders



[RLH]



Body Movies 2001.
Shadows of passers-by reveal thousands of portraits of people from the city. Commissioned by V2 for Cultural Capital of Europe, Rotterdam. Photo: Arie Kievit.

Beryl Graham

Delicate Controls

A delicate differentiation of interaction

11.00 am Until now about 80 visitors in the office. Half, however, remain standing in the doorway and look around, others walk past the blackboards, and then remain longer in the office. Some only come to the door and leave in fright, as if they had come into the wrong restroom.

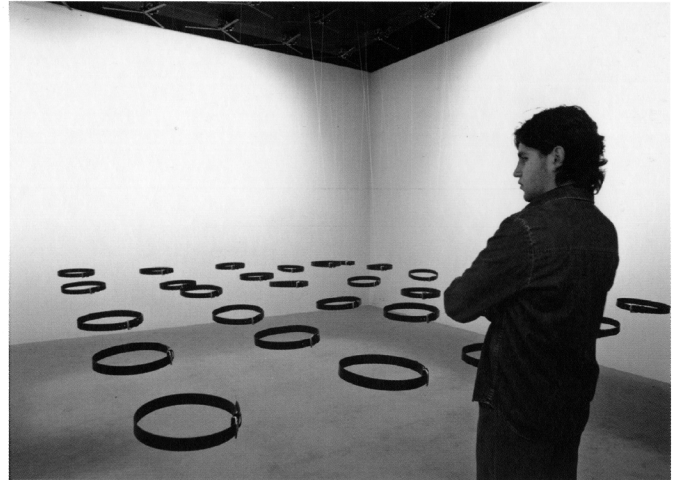
Joseph Beuys and Dirk Schwarze 1972¹

As even the mighty Joseph Beuys discovered, hosting interaction or participation is not easy. At the *Documenta 5* art festival he installed the *Bureau for Direct Democracy* for 100 days, and remarked upon the behaviours of the audience: when called upon to suddenly participate in art contexts, audiences might justifiably behave as if they had '... come into the wrong restroom'. Perhaps it was the famous Beuys hat that put people off from entering the space, perhaps it was some of the other highly complex variables which affect human behaviour, not least of which is the fact that one is not often called upon to participate in art. The wide range of skills needed by an artist to make participative art are hugely impressive to me, and as a curator of contemporary art (both new media and not) over a number of years, certain needs have become clear: firstly the need to define what kind of reaction, interaction, participation or collaboration is intended, and secondly the need to understand what contexts of display might relate to which kinds of 'behaviours'.²

New media artists in general show impressive understanding of systems and networks – those complex hierarchies of who is connecting with what – be that audiences, co-producers, artists, software or objects. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's body of work in particular has greatly informed definitions of different kinds of interaction, by delicately differentiating subtle variations. His *Body Movies* series, for example (the basis for *People On People*), shows several kinds of reaction and interaction in the same work. The first can perhaps be seen as a gentle introduction to the space and the artwork: if audience members cover the projections of photographs of people with their own shadows, they can see the image properly, and perhaps reflect on themselves in

Standards and Double Standards
2004.

Fifty suspended belts automatically rotate so that their buckles face the public. Collections, MUAC Museum, Mexico City and CIFO, Miami. Photo: Peter Hauck.



relation to another person. Secondly if several people cover the photographic images at the same time, the computer program reacts by showing a new set of photographs. This is the programmed artwork reacting to the audience and is a fairly basic affordance of new media, but one which obviously profoundly affects the reading of the work. The extra level here is that the audience members need to co-operate with each other in order to make this happen, and this will depend on the context and the social skills involved. This is interaction between people, intended by the artist in order to gain a reaction from the artwork. The third kind of interaction is further outside of the control of the artist, but intended nevertheless. The audience may ignore the photographs, and use the big shadows either for personal spectacle or for interaction between people. Cue much gleeful sexual horseplay and different levels of mock violence, made curiously 'safe' by being shadows, but also involving creative interplay using props and imagination. Lozano-Hemmer has done much observation of the behaviours involved, including the ways in which any individual or group monopolising the platform or behaving in ways too violent or sexual, can be controlled by others cooperating to stand in front of the lights.³ As the artist has noted, without the thoughtful 'hosting structures' to introduce people to interaction, only children (or perhaps the chemically disinhibited) will participate.⁴ The artist is here acting as a gracious 'host' for interaction between people, from a starting point of the computer programme's reaction to human input. Without the reflective 'shadowing' of photographs of other people, would the quality of creative shadowplay diminish?

The artist's understanding of behaviours informs these decisions, and the 'distance' afforded by using shadows, and

photographic images of other people, makes the interactions less socially risky. In the artworks *People on People*, and *Microphones*, the distance of time also helps to smooth the social anxieties of interaction in a gallery space: other people are present, but this might be as a distant echo... In *Pulse Room* the human presence is particularly elegant: each small personal spectacle of electric energy slides gently into the community pool, and when each flicker shuffles off the end of the grid, there is a sense of loss and evanescence. The tension between individual egoistic spectacle, and co-operation, is a fascination in Lozano-Hemmer's work: Do we treat each others' shadows with respect? Are we tracing only our own heartbeat? Unfortunately, that tension between the individual and group is one that is already firmly decided by much mainstream art criticism, and is a position which makes the development of a serious aesthetics of participation very difficult: to cite Hal Foster concerning Rirkrit Tiravanija's work, for example, 'This is where I side with Sartre on a bad day: often in galleries and museums, hell is other people.'⁵

Somewhere between heaven and hell lies a delicate balance between the individual and the group, and for the artist, a balance between artistic control and being a self-effacing host. As Lozano-Hemmer has said, 'successful pieces that feature 'interactivity for groups' are usually out-of-control'.⁶

Control and technology

Race and other forms of cultural difference have been historically presented as secret unknowns that require definition, mapping, measuring and legislating by those in power, in order to render them public.

Jennifer González 2010⁷



Vectorial Elevation 1999.
Light designs made by visitors to
web site www.alzado.net. First
installed at the Zócalo Square in
Mexico City. Photo: Martin Vargas.

Art using contemporary technologies often struggles with a critical response which is based on a kind of 'virgin/whore' dichotomy of cultural meaning: these technologies are fluffy 'hands-on fun for kids' – entertaining enough but essentially shallow – a gossipy world of mass media chat rooms, networked bitching and vapour theory; alternatively, these technologies are military-industrial nightmares of command and control – networks of iris-scan surveillance, genetic mapping databases, smart bombs, and shock-and-awe commercial advertising. As Jennifer Gonzalez points out, this also places technologies on the disputed borders of public and private, and at the centre of issues of 'embodiment'. If a non-citizen has been through USA entry procedures, then their fingerprints are now recorded.

Lozano-Hemmer's body of work has been acutely aware of these embodied meanings of technology, from private to public, or from intimate and moving experiences to spectacles of command and control. His early work involving huge publicly-controlled searchlights in public spaces made specific reference to Nazi light-shows and spectacles. *Standards and Double Standards* is his gallery installation where a set of men's belts turn to face the viewer in the room; a sinister installation on a claustrophobic scale, inferring domestic surveillance and violence. In the *Recorders* exhibition, the emphasis is on exactly who is 'recording' what: *Pulse Index* places our skin identity alongside that of other people, but unlike the immigration databases, allows the samples to fade into the forgiving oblivion of forgetting. *33 Questions per Minute* references the sublime evanescent deluge of chat online, whilst also posing 'who asks the questions here?' As a Mexican-Canadian who has also lived in Europe, Lozano-

Hemmer has crossed particularly disputed borders, and would be aware that some people are more recorded than others. Again, there is a particular tension here between the individual and the group: Gonzalez also explains that 'Race has traditionally been thought of as a 'quality' of individuals, therefore reducible ... to a property or mere set of appearances that one can theoretically 'move beyond'. But race is not a property; it is a relation of public encounter.'

In acknowledging the intensely negative aspects of both technology and interaction in his work, and by exploring those tensions between individuals and the group, and in particular the complex 'relations of public encounter', Lozano-Hemmer has admirably addressed the current issue of taking interactive work beyond saccharine 'hands-on fun', and into spaces where conflict can be faced.

Relational Architectures

It seems to me that there is an urgent need to undo the innocence of participation. Isn't this kind of practice precisely the modus operandi that we can find in so many 'socially relevant' practices today? It seems interesting how particular practices have hijacked the notion of participation as an unquestionably positive, user-driven means of engagement. In this context, it could be useful to think through a concept of 'conflictual participation' as a productive form of interventional practice.

Markus Miessen 2007⁸

Recently, there has been some debate in the contemporary art world about participatory art, with Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' criticised by Claire Bishop for a lack of space for conflict in participatory systems.⁹

This has caused some wry amusement to those who have worked in socially engaged art for many years, and those in new media art, who are well over the hump of the hype-cycle concerning interaction, and have established a critical vocabulary for exactly what might relate to who, and in what way. Lozano-Hemmer was using the term 'Relational Architecture' some time before this recent debate and it still forms a useful term for accurately reflecting the nature of 'planning' interaction – artists, like architects, might cunningly design a 'shell' within which certain behaviours might be encouraged, but despite all the modish 'user-driven' participation in the world, the architect is still not in control of the audience or user who might inhabit that 'shell'.

What remains is a continuing incompatibility between mainstream contemporary art, and participatory art systems, in several ways: the existing fine art star-system of big names makes more self-effacing roles for the artist in terms of 'authorship' problematic; art criticism has a problem with the 'quality' of participation; and issues of 'control' in relation to audience are often an anxiety for curators. There are, however, reasons to be optimistic that the debate has moved on since *The Sunday Telegraph* opined in 1971 that any participatory art opportunity '... makes people behave like wild beasts'.¹⁰ This Lozano-Hemmer exhibition, as a substantial body of work showing an in depth development of interaction and participation, in a major gallery space, is one of those reasons to be cheerful. The systems involved demand accuracy, delicacy and complexity, and above all, the huge step of handing some control to an audience, whilst gracefully hosting the serious party that might follow.

1. Beuys, Joseph and Dirk Schwarze (2006) "Report on a day's proceedings at the Bureau for Direct Democracy // 1972." In: Bishop, Claire (ed.) *Participation* (Documents of Contemporary Art). Cambridge/London: MIT Press/Whitechapel. pp. 120-124.
2. The discussion of new media art in terms of behaviours, including a chapter on participatory systems, is explored in: Graham, Beryl and Sarah Cook (2010) *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Graham, Beryl (2010) "What kind of participative system? Critical vocabularies from new media art." In: Anna Dezeuze (ed.) *The 'Do-it-Yourself' Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 281-305.
3. Discussed in Graham and Cook, *ibid*.
4. Ranzenbacher, Heimo (2001) "Metaphors of Participation: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer interviewed by Heimo Ranzenbacher." *Ars Electronica Festival 2001*. <http://www.aec.at/festival2001/texte/lozano_e.html>.
5. Foster, Hal (2006) "Chat rooms // 2004." In: Bishop, Claire (ed.) *Participation* (Documents of Contemporary Art). Cambridge/London: MIT Press/Whitechapel. pp. 190-195.
6. Lozano-Hemmer, Rafael (6 Dec 2001) "Too interactive (belated)." *New-Media-Curating Discussion List*. [Online]. Available from URL: <<http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/new-media-curating.html>>.
7. González, Jennifer (2010) "Race, Secrecy and Digital Art Practice." In: Anna Dezeuze (ed.) *The 'Do-it-Yourself' Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. pp. 185-205.
8. Miessen, Markus and Chantal Mouffe (2007) "Articulated power relations." In: Miessen, Markus (ed.) *The Violence of Participation*. New York: Sternberg. pp. 37-48.
9. Discussed in Graham and Cook, *ibid*.
10. Bird, Jon (1999) "Minding the body: Robert Morris's 1971 Tate Gallery Retrospective." In: Michael Newman & Jon Bird (eds.) *Rewriting Conceptual Art*. London: Reaktion Books. pp. 88-106. This press comment is from 1971, when the Tate closed the hands-on version of Robert Morris' sculptural art after a few days. In May 2009 the Live Art curators at Tate Modern instigated a successful re-installation the exhibition with systems to cope with the 'risks' of participation.