

CONTEMPORARY ART WORLD CURRENTS

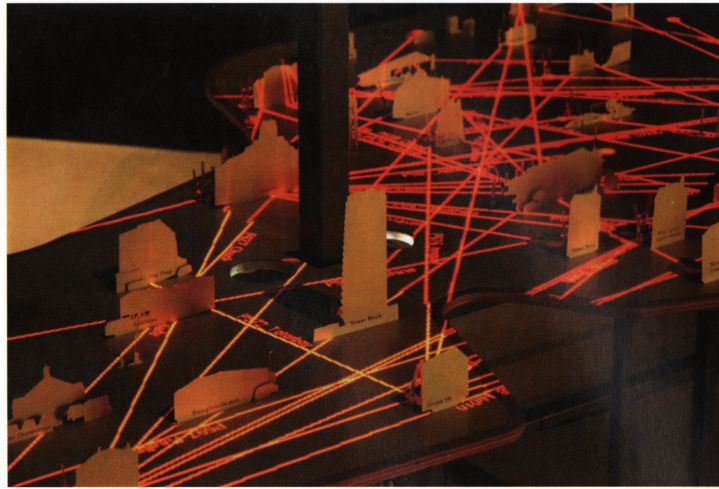


12.11 Blu
MUTO, 2007-08.
Still from a video
animation of mural
paintings, 7 mins.
26 secs.

12.12 Rafael
Lozano-Hemmer
Under Scan, 2005. Digital
interactive public art
project using robotic
projectors, media
servers, Pani 12kW
projectors, scissor
lifts, computerized
surveillance system,
custom software.
Courtesy of the artist.



12.13 Blast Theory
Day of the Figurines,
 2005–06. Pervasive SMS
 text-messaging game
 and installation.
 Courtesy of the artists.



in which the voices of everyone are constantly heard, a genuinely democratic space: “Imagine a city where graffiti wasn’t illegal, a city where everybody could draw wherever they liked. Where every street was awash with a million colours and little phrases. Where standing at a bus stop was never boring. A city that felt like a living breathing thing which belonged to everybody, not just the real estate agents and barons of big business. Imagine a city like that and stop leaning against the wall—it’s wet.”²³ Although each of Banksy’s interventions takes the form of an amusing if pointed visual joke, there is anger against authority in these works, and encouragement to keep struggling against it because the very act of visual vandalism shows that such authority is not all-powerful.

Argentine artist group Blu, known since 2001 for its lively graphic animations about the alienation of life in rapidly modernizing societies, has recently—in an unexpected reversal—applied digital animation to mural paintings. In *MUTO* (Fig. 12.11), a seven-minute video made in Buenos Aires and Baden in 2007 and 2008, self-transforming humanoids shape-shift across one surface to another. Beginning as aliens who dig themselves out from a brick street-wall, the mutating figures then go through doorways and over fences and detritus, cover buildings of all kinds (consuming preexisting graffiti as they go), pass down alleyways, cross pavements, enter tunnels (here the figures become a Kafkaesque insect), and spread over interior walls, furniture, desktops, and sheets of paper (which a quasi-office-worker gobbles up). Sounds appropriate to each gesture are added, along with ambient street noises and upbeat circus music. A Surrealist fascination with the contingency of the incongruous echoes through Argentine art, as we saw earlier (see pages 121–25). *MUTO* ends on the side wall of a house, where a profiled head is swarmed over by a bevy of insects that eat it up, exposing its deformed skull.²⁴

In a world increasingly subject to surveillance, it is no surprise that artists create works that not only alert us to these covert intrusions into our lives, but also enable us to practice the skills of alternative networking.

In a series of public art projects that he sees as a form of “relational architecture,” Mexican new-media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer creates environments in which multiple participants can interact with others through a negotiated exchange of each other’s visual image. Individuals walking across a town square are filmed, and their stilled images projected a few seconds later. By anticipating this, participants can act out a gesture. Others might respond to this gesture, and add one of their own. Soon, a small narrative of cooperation becomes visible. During 2005 and 2006, the *Under Scan* project (Fig. 12.12) enabled 1,000 people at a time to respond to digital footage of each other’s portraits, simultaneously, in public squares in the English towns and cities of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Northampton, and Nottingham.²⁵ *Day of the Figurines* (2005–06) (Fig. 12.13), a game for mobile phones devised by the British artists’ group Blast Theory, who specialize in interactive media, may be played by hundreds of people at the same time. Using the phone’s text-messaging functionality, the game is woven into the player’s daily life for 24 days, requiring each participant to send and receive just a few messages each day. The 24 days correspond to 24 hours in the life of a fictional English town undergoing changes (social breakdown, invasion, climate-change events) that render it dystopian. Participants have to find their own way to work against these pressures. Most soon begin to call on other players for assistance. The town is manifested as a large game board that registers the general decline and the players’ moves. Housed in a public venue, it becomes a stage set, subject to remote change. Matt Adams of Blast Theory explains: “One of the motivations for this work is to create a morally ambiguous universe. We’re making a case here for how games—which tend to be morally dry and lifeless—might be made to work... Can art exist on your mobile phone? Can it exist in your pocket, rather than in a gallery or a museum or a theatre?”²⁶ In *Day of the Figurines* and other new media-based, participatory works, Blast Theory is showing that it can.