

## FLASH IN JAPAN

BRIAN MASSUMI ON RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER'S *AMODAL SUSPENSION*

"A MESSAGE FOR YOU is floating in the sky of Yamaguchi." Beginning on November 1—in conjunction with the opening of the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Japan—thousands of people around the world will receive this alert by cell phone or e-mail, kicking off Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's installation *Amodal Suspension (Relational Architecture 8)*, which runs through November 24. The message will in fact be waiting for them, suspended in the night sky over this city in southern Japan—waiting and flashing, like the seductively illegible signals that Japan's most popular winged insect, the lightning bug, uses to find mates for coupling. Yamaguchi is, after all, the self-declared firefly capital of the country, dedicating a major yearly festival to the bug. At first sight, the light signals that *Amodal Suspension* is to send pulsing into the sky will be just as illegible as the insect variety, but many orders of magnitude more visible. Standing in for the arthropod abdomen will be an array of the world's most powerful robotic searchlights, perched one apiece atop custom-built steel towers ringing the site of the new Yamaguchi Center, which was designed by Arata Isozaki.

In *Amodal Suspension*, people may send short text messages to each other using a cell phone or Web browser connected to [www.amodal.net](http://www.amodal.net). But rather than being sent directly to their intended recipients, the messages are encoded as unique sequences of flashes and "deposited" in the sky, awaiting collection. A searchlight designated by the sender will begin to beam the message and rotate. Then a random second searchlight will pick up the code, and the two beams will intersect, flashing in unison. No sooner will they connect, however, than the first beam will extinguish. A third random searchlight will then take up the message, intersecting with the second. The messages will be relayed in this fashion from one pair of

searchlights to another, in a dance of lights. This touch-and-go mating of asexual rays is the only coupling that effectively takes place. A number of processes have been designed into the installation to come between the sender and the receiver of the message. These complicate the bipolar transmission usually considered to lie at the heart of human communication to such a degree that one is forced to say either that what is being made visible here is not (or not only) human communication or that human communication is not definable by the dual subjective structure almost universally assumed to characterize it.

**AMODAL SUSPENSION MAKES VISIBLE THE RE-ARISING OR REEMERGENCE OF SPECIFICALLY HUMAN COMMUNICATION, IN ITS FIRST FLASH, OR FLASH, SEEN FOR WHAT IT IS: A NONLINEAR CROWD PHENOMENON.**

The first complication is that the message appears in an entirely different mode than its enabling code. It is present in a purely visible way, seen before it can be read, and unable to be read as it is seen. This is because the flashing in the sky is a translation of the digital input into an analog signal that preserves only select characteristics of the digitally encoded linguistic meaning. To each letter in the message corresponds a change in the intensity of the beam. Letter by letter, different light intensities daisy-chain without interruption, in a continuity of variation. There is a moment of darkness between words, but this interval is in no way comparable to the off-state of the digital code. It is more a punctuation between the continuities of variation on either side than merely one half of the on/off binary. The interval's *offness* makes a threesome: two series of intensities, with itself between. This "thirdness" (to speak like founding semiotician C.S. Peirce) is the basic articulation of the signal. But three's a crowd. Each of the variations punctuated by the off-

state is multiple, consisting of a population of intensities. This complexity translates as a pulsation, a result very different from the strobe effect ordinarily used to transmit code visually. Most if not all of the messages will consist of more than two words. Coming irregularly in the midst of a series of changes in intensity, the moment of darkness will meld into the continuing pulsing, its threeness passing into the multiplicity it parses. Rather than an off-state that is the opposite of an on-state, it will come across as the low note on the same scale (brightness). In other words, the compositional principle of the signal, as

experienced, is more a continuous *modulation* of a single dimension of perception than an encoding of separate bits of data or a sequencing of units of meaning. Modulation is the very definition of the analog signal—a continuous variation in amplitude and time (i.e., a smoothly varying value).

So what value is being analogically varied here? The changes in intensity are based on the frequency with which the corresponding letter occurs in the language of the message. The higher the frequency, the brighter the pulse. Letter frequency is a socio-historical variable. It materializes in statistical form the particularities of a culturally specific linguistic evolution. In *Amodal Suspension*, this cultural-frequency variable pulses into view as a visual rhythm. The encoding of letter frequency into the beam attaches it genetically to culture-specific rhythms of speech. But the encoding is not visually decodable by the viewer, any more than the meaning of the message can be seen in the pulse and flutter. What comes across

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Amodal Suspension (Relational Architecture 8)*, 2003, rendering for an interactive installation, Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Yamaguchi, Japan.



