Another Me and My Shadow

Imagine those first tentative steps on an icy milk tray, people bunching and gigglng. Only here no one is sitting – they’re shadow-shuffling, searching for “video portraits” that loom beneath their feet in images of somebody else.

It’s the first night of Under Scan, a £1m public art installation funded by EMDA, the East Midlands Regional Development Agency, which combines the age-old amateur drama of shadow play with high tech street surveillance. It works by turning up to 2,000 sq m into an ad-hoc amphitheatre of light, using a powerful 12kW projector. Then, a computer tracks people’s movements, and triggers 14 smaller projectors to throw the video portraits (short film loops of another person) into their path; they pop up within the shape of their shadows.

“If you pay no attention to it, the portrait is also not interested and disappears,” says Under Scan’s creator, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. “If you engage, it’ll come alive and look up at you, maybe send kisses or make question marks, whatever.” It’s completely unexpected – people were invited to do what they liked.

From its opening in Lincoln (until 22 January), and then heads to Northampton, Derby and Nottingham, finishing 22 March. Local interestcompared to that generated wherever Spencer Tunick shoots his mass nudity photographs. More than 1,000 volunteers were filmed last summer for the video portraits, except – this time – they kept their clothes on.

As you might expect, the man behind the scenes is a bright spark. A 37-year-old Mexican-Canadian artist, Lozano-Hemmer has staged similar events around the world. Most involve mischievous interplay between the built environment, clever software and some great lights. The East Midlands should feel pleased to have him: he’s a multimedia magician with a brief about urban design, a digital sculptor of the radio spectrum, a lord of糜info for the iMac generation.

Under Scan is number 11 in a series called Relational Architecture, each one a temporary technological takeover of public space, exploring the artist’s ideas about the civic realm. “Design in public space today is all about getting us from work to home as quickly as possible,” he maintains. “Or else being exposed to the largest advertising displays, but I’m interested in designing the social sphere so that, all of a sudden, you’re invited to relate to people in a different way. It’s really important to give agency to people in public space and think of ways to occupy it other than shopping. Projects like these are eccentric experiences.”

His most stunning piece, Vectorial Elevation, played in Lyon for a UN summit, in Mexico City during its millennium celebrations, and in Dublin to mark the EU expansion. Yet Lozano-Hemmer was hardly pandering to affinities.

Vectorial Elevation enabled anyone, via a website, to design skyscraping patterns by controlling 18 robotic searchlights, visible from 15km away. In total, around 1.5 million people took part, with the results archived on personalised webpages.

Searchlights, as Lozano-Hemmer points out, have associations with Albert Speer’s “fascist spectacles of power” and authoritarianism generally. “I tried to introduce interactivity to transform intimidation into intimacy,” he explains. If his theories sound didactic, in practice his work is good fun. Another project gives people the chance to scan shortwave frequencies, using their bodies as antennas, so that they exude a mobile chime, air traffic signals and, police bands. It’s hacker art, and his democratic instinct draws him to Buckminster Fuller, too.

He did many things. Lozano-Hemmer enthuses. “But what I’m really excited about is that he was the pioneer of networked architecture. You know, no central point – the centre being the romantic view or the modern ‘centres/orbits’ view – his was a true network, a mesh of interconnected nodes. To us in the internet age, it’s completely logical, but he came up with this long before anyone else.”

Back with Under Scan, I see what Lozano-Hemmer means when he declares ‘locality, like identity, is a performance’. Waving at the camera is nothing new, and the eagerness with which people look for their portraits reminds me of those observational films by Mitchell & Kenyon in the early 1900s, and how folk queued to watch themselves, and their towns, on screen. That’s why ‘people think twice about being too monotonous’ in the video, he suggests: unconsciously, it becomes a source of civic pride how they behave.

Perhaps the later venues, where Under Scan is more covert, will be different; at the ‘petri dish’ in Lincoln, however, a traditional culture was revived. Technology made its observers take their time, talk longer – without having to be somewhere else. Like leisurely Edwardians, they were promenading, surely.

“Yes,” Lozano-Hemmer says, gleefully. “That’s a good word. I’ve been saying ‘meandering’, but rivers meander, people promenad!”

Richard Clayton
In Under Scan, people's 'video portraits' fit into others' shadows, above and far left. Right, Vectorial Illumination in Mexico City, uses searchlights. Left, patterns are drawn on specific buildings in 1000 Platitudes, in Lima.