TECH

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. 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 FLUSH, 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

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

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is, simply, the rhythm. A languagelike rhythm—without the actual language.

Rhythm is the most perceptually salient dimension of language. Phonemes disappear into their meaning; you don't hear them to the exact degree to which you understand them. But their rhythm asserts itself, an experienced something-extra that conveys an emphasis, accent, tone, or mood. The rhythm carries the force of the phrase, above and beyond its structure and meaning. *Amodal Suspension* uses encoding to make visible this extralinguistic effectiveness: the force of language. This is the variable that is being analogically presented. The display conveys the *feel* of a statement's impact without its meaning. We get the same feel from the firefly's inhuman light show of exoskeletal love. It is impossible to watch them and not get the uncanny feeling that they are "talking" to each other.

The installation makes human language visible at a rhythmic limit where it shades into a dimension of experience that is necessary to its workings but is not of its mode, since it is also the province of the bug. The work creates a visual analogue of human language, something "like" it, that reattaches language not only to a particular cultural evolution but also to the biosemiotic background from which it emerged. The meaning and structure of language are "suspended" in the beam, against the forceful background of their own emergence. What is positively experienced here is a transitional zone where language in its human mode rhythmically returns to the animal fold from which it came, at the same time as its sound mode translates into a visual mode akin to gesture (which beckons to speech, heralding its possibility, in the human as in the animal). What lies transitionally between modes is "amodal."

The force of a statement never fails to make itself felt. But it also always fades, making way for the next utterance. In *Amodal Suspension*, the beams slowly rise into the sky and decrease in intensity while preserving the original rhythm. In the meantime, other messages are received and displayed. With twenty towers, up to ten messages can beckon at once, each with a signature pulse. The air crowds with the sight of language rising. The properly linguistic dimension is not lost. It is still there, latent as a definite possibility in the code, which is ever shown, though enabling the display.

To see the latent content, the addressee must "grab" the message from the beaming crowd as he would a pluck a point of light from a summer cloud of fireflies. This is done by clicking on the beam on the real-time website simulation of the event, or on-site via cell phone by entering the number of the tower currently carrying the message. To access the coded content, participants must perform a digital analogue of gesture, beckoning delivery of the meaning content. And they'd best do it fast: As soon as the message is grabbed, the beam disappears. If someone beats them to it, they receive a message informing them of the name and location of the poacher. (The message can still be accessed from the public log archived on the server.)

The base definition of linguistic communication is often considered to be the transmission of syntactically coded content from a sender to a receiver. The problem with that bipolar transmission model is that it fails to distinguish between insect communication and human language—and not because the model has complexly returned to their transitional zone, but merely because it has oversimplified. There may or may not be a syntax to firefly flashes, but there certainly is to bee waggles. The reason commonly given to explain why the bee does not have language even though it is capable of communicating syntactically coded message content is that the message cannot be retransmitted to a third party.

The communicational system, found in nature, best able to do that is human language. Human communication is defined by this linguistic "thirdness," by its capacity not for linear transmission but for indirection. This complicates things: With that third party waiting down the line comes the possibility of someone jumping line and intercepting the message. Indirect relay and message poaching, or hacking, is the true ground of human communication. With indirect relay inevitably comes noise and the accompanying distortion of message content. A fuller model than sender–(coded message)–receiver would be a combination of the games of "telephone" and musical chairs.

Of course, "third" parties never come in ones. Where there's one third, there's bound to be another down the noisy line. Three's a crowd again. But this time the triadic multiplicity separates human language back out, returning it to its proper mode. Lozano-Hemmer's installation also makes visible the re-arising or reemergence of specifically human communication, in its first flush, or flash, seen for what it is: a nonlinear crowd phenomenon. The rising community of poachable beams is Lozano-Hemmer's visual analogue of what he calls the chaotic social soup of many-party "thirdness": a literal flash mob.

The "relational architecture" of the installation performs the community ground of human communication, even as it connects communication to its outside. This is what the installation complicatingly interjects between the first and second parties of the simple dual-subjective model of communication: three's-a-crowd relationality and the outside force that comes with language but is not it (is instead its "extra" effect).

Lozano-Hemmer's work requires us to reassess our notions of the analog and the digital, of language and code, meaning and force, human and non-human communication. But it does so not by commenting, critiquing, or sending a message itself. It does it aesthetically, by which I do not mean "beautifully" (although his installations always are that, too). Rather, I mean "aesthetic" in something closer to the etymological meaning: as in *aesthesis*, "making sensible." The relational architecture he has pioneered is the amodal digital art of making sensible what isn't (force, community, relational emergence) in participatory analog splendor: like insect, like art. □

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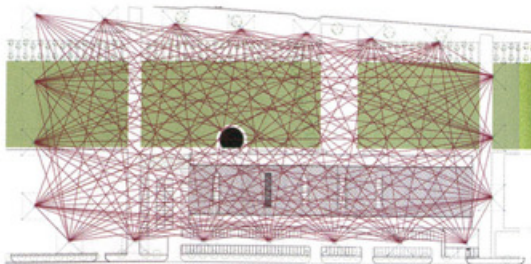
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Amodal Suspension (Relational Architecture 8),* **2003,** renderings for an interactive installation, Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Yamaguchi, Japan.

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