Interview with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer for the Ars Electronica 2001 Catalog

"Takeover," the theme of Ars Electronica 2001, poses the question of who's making the art of tomorrow. If one disregards the futurological implications of this issue, "Takeover" can be seen as an effort to address a range of possibilities that has already begun to emerge to some extent.

1)
This interview appears in the chapter "Engineers of Experience," a title that could basically serve as an alternative characterization of artists in general. After all, the term engineer as a designation for an expert who plans and executes works on the basis of competence in natural science and technical know-how, rooted as it is in the Latin word ingenium, denotes someone gifted and filled with the spirit of inventiveness.
—What significance does the recourse of the arts to natural science and technology have for you as an artist?

Like most people, I like living vicariously through technology. I am seduced by amplification, simulation, telematics and things that crash. I work with technology because it is ompossible not to. Technology is one of the inevitable languages of globalisation. I like calling it a language because this conveys two attributes that are significant. Firstly, that technology is inseparable from contemporary identity, —there is no such thing as "what we were like before technology"—, and secondly that it is not something that has been invented or engineered, but rather that it has evolved through constantly-changing social, economic, physical and political forces. I think artists use technology explicitly as a way to understand and criticise from within some of the paradoxes of our culture. How can "media" culture actually result in disintermediation? How can a condition of placelessness become situated as multi-place? How come telematics may actually remarginalize the periphery?

On the other hand, there is a tendency for "technologically correct" art, like critic Lorne Falk says, where artists, museums and galleries adopt technology not to create new experiences specific to the new media, but rather to leverage and validate their current grab-bag of metaculture. It is interesting that the successive waves of techno-hype for multimedia, VR, the internet, and now ubiquitous computing have been typically reported by using cliché references to the Renaissance as though we were about to enter a new humanism where the user is the "centre of the digital world". The human today is at the centre of nothing but a flock or stampede. If we could zoom out of our scene we would probably see ourselves following relatively established patterns and group behaviours, like partaking in consumer culture, which are unavoidable. This humanist approach, where art and science may pretend to be one and the same thing, is nostalgia at best and necrophilia at worst. I find it significant that the first realistic computer models of humans (synthespians) were done at the same time that flocking

behaviours (particle systems) were being implemented in high-end animation packages. Many years ago I wrote an essay for Leonardo magazine called "Perverting Technological Correctness" where I outlined some strategies artists deploy to corrupt the inevitability of corporate technologies. Among them, I included the simulation of technology itself, the use of pain, ephemeral intervention, misuse of technology, non-digital approaches to virtuality and resistance to what I call the "effect" effect.

2)
The media engaged by so-called media art constitute not only a means to an end (the mediation of an experience); rather, they are also always a reference system (the experience). In this way, media art basically resembles art that takes shape outside of a technological context. In contrast to, for instance, the color blue of a picture that refers primarily to art-immanence, technology constitutes an intersubjectively binding reference system. One serves as a basis for art's claim to autonomy, the other for the renunciation of autonomy.
—How do you see the position of the artist (in general) within this field of tension and interplay?
—What about your own particular position?

I think all art, technological or not, defines an "intersubjectively binding reference system". In my opinion, all good art questions any "autonomy" that this reference system may lay claim to. Autonomous from what? Duchamp nailed the impossibility of autonomy in art with his maxim "Le regard fait le tableau" (the look makes the painting). Everything is dependent on relationships, some of these relationships are established in an ad hoc way and others are carefully choreographed. Personally I am very motivated by the tensions and interplay arising from linking alien memories, that is, connecting intensely disparate planes of experience. I think this can be done with or without explicit technological dependence.

3)
The name Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is connected with, among other things, the "Relational Architecture" series (DISPLACED EMPERORS; VECTORIAL ELEVATION etc.), projects in which the public is involved to an increasing extent. What is the significance for you and your work of seeing that realization of these projects is dependent upon the readiness of others to participate? Are there strategies to increase the readiness of others to participate?

Dependency on participation is a humbling affair. My pieces do not exist unless someone dedicates some time to them. Most people, with the exception of children, will opt to not participate in an installation in public space, —which may seem strange considering that we live in the age of reality TV and the society of the spectacle. This is due in part to shyness and living in a culture of rules like

"do not touch", but I like to think that there are two other reasons. One is political: people are sceptical about the neutrality of public space. No one wants to go along with a culture of surveillance, even if they know that it is inevitable. The other is aesthetic: some people prefer the chaotic sights and sounds of an urban landscape, or silence, rather than some canned multimedia intervention that forces you to focus on one event, usually to sell you something.

For me dependency on participation is a way to "ground" an installation and this helps me conceive interfaces and strategies that demystify the spectacular. The key is to develop pieces that offer some degree of intimacy within an intimidating scale. Also to find participation metaphors that are relatively familiar or self-explaining. Finally to offer a wide range of entry points into the work, attempting to underline the incompleteness, uselessness and indeterminacy of the initiative.

When we look at projects that offer collective participation there are usually two strategies, which I call "taking turns" or "taking averages". Taking turns is the most common, and in it interaction is restricted to one or two people who have the control of the installation while others are passive. Displaced Emperors was like that, as only one person could hold the tracking system. Taking averages is the strategy used in game shows, rides or several variants of interactive cinema, where there are sensors whose signals are averaged and then statistically directed at a few possible courses of action. I find this latter strategy extremely frustrating and democratic, it does not allow for eccentric or perverse readings of the artwork, which should be fostered and not hindered in my opinion.

For my latest piece "Body Movies" in Rotterdam (which takes place at the same time as the Ars Electronica Festival), we will use a collective interface strategy that is neither of the above. We will project the shadows of passers-by and a single camera tracker will detect these. We can have as many people as fit in the public square interacting simultaneously without the need for any interface device. Everyone already has a sophisticated vocabulary of interaction with their shadow, so no explanation of the media is necessary. There will be collective behaviours emerging from the group of shadows, —in particular, the self-organisation of scale according to social constraints—, but also each person will have a discrete and direct participation as their shadow is recognisably theirs.

4)
For a project like VECTORIAL ELEVATION or DISPLACED EMPERORS, the mode of cooperation determines not only how it is implemented but also how it develops—there are always different individuals, artists, technicians and programmers involved.
—What consequences does this mode of cooperation have for the conception of projects?

My pieces are always collaborations, usually with my long-standing collaborator Will Bauer, with whom I have done pieces since 1989. Depending on the type of

project I have also worked with programmers, writers, photographers, choreographers, architects, composers and so on. Sometimes a project may involve up to a couple dozen people. Even when I am working on a project alone I still feel it is a collaboration because I am always aware that tools that I use are already encoded with the "personality" of its programmer/designer. Creation is always a fluid dialog. The mode of cooperative conception that works for us is one derived from the performing arts: there is a director, actors, composers, and so on.

5) The element of the political—both in the sense of the political-ideological, the forces shaping society, as well as in the sense of the political community—assumes increasing importance in your works (such as RE:POSITIONING FEAR), or not least of all as a result of them, in that the public sphere is their "setting."
—How important to you is the political aspect of your creative work?
—Has the network-linked working situation changed your understanding of the "political"?
—If so, how has this manifested itself in your artistic work?

Everything that takes place in public space has political dimensions. My biases are usually manifested through certain choices, but in general I believe that one of the roles of the artist is not so much to provide moralistic commentary but rather to create spaces for participation, where a plurality of positions may emerge. Participation itself is a strong political element, particularly as the public sphere loses its claim to "represent" the people that may occupy it. Participation transforms "special-effects" into "special-causes-and-effects" which is more interesting from a political point of view.

I have a lot of respect and admiration for the work of Krzysztof Wodiczko, Hans Haacke and other artists who have deployed deeply creative strategies to reveal and debunk the power narratives of certain public settings. At the same time, I want to establish my practice far away from deconstructive techniques utilised in such "site-specific" works. I like to call my work "relationship-specific" in the sense that the emphasis is not on the essential or even "important" characteristics of a site, or on the narratives that power elites may bestow on them, but rather on the micro-politics of new temporary relationships that may arise from alien interventions.

6)
You once defined "relational architecture" as "the technological actualisation of buildings and public spaces with alien memory." In this definition, the topos architecture (which, in the sense of a conception of meaning and purpose that has become manifest or, rather, "concrete," always designates a retrospective statement) is replaced by properties that are less clearly defined and become accessible rather through experience and analysis.

—Are there thus differences between the strategies and practices of a "relational architect of alien memories" and those of an engineer of experience (such as those that arise from the means they employ) or are these just two sides of the same coin?

I am not sure I like the term "engineer of experience". It sounds like a job description for a theme park. But I guess most museums today aspire to be theme parks, (which is fine by me). I think it is an interesting question to ask, for example, "what is the 'theme' behind the Guggenheim brand?" The other thing I dislike is that "engineer of experience" sounds very "top-down", like your task is to model all possible outcomes of a situation, calculate and contain them. Most electronic artists are looking for an out-of-control quality that will result in their work actually having outcomes that they did not anticipate. If the piece does not surprise the author in someway then it is not truly successful in my opinion.