# Artists Reclaim the Commons

## New Works / New Territories / New Publics

Edited by Glenn Harper and Twylene Moyer



Fortin, Sylvie. “The Light that Blinds: A Conversation with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.” ISC Press, Hamilton, 2013: 275-283. Print. (english)

# The Light that Blinds: A Conversation with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (2013)

*by Sylvie Fortin*

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's work operates at the intersection of architecture and performance, recording the radical transformation of space and bodies under neo-liberalism. His site-sensitive and relationship-specific installations create ephemeral platforms for participation in variously public spaces, from museums to city squares and the sky, while exploring alternative uses of the technologies of control, including surveillance (remote viewing, biometrics, social networks), robotics, and telematics. Inspired by phantasmagoria, his public commissions create anti-monuments premised on negotiation: rehearsal spaces for subjectivity-constitution.

Lozano-Hemmer was the first artist to officially represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale (2007). His work has also been featured in many other biennials, including Havana, Istanbul, Liverpool, New Orleans, and Seoul. He has received two awards for Interactive Art from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA), a Golden Nica at the Prix Ars Electronica in Austria, and a Rockefeller Fellowship. His commissioned work has appeared around the world, from Mexico City, Philadelphia, and Vancouver to Rotterdam, Lyon, and Dublin.

**Sylvie Fortin:** *"Relational Architecture" is the concept under which you've been producing temporary, what I would call "transactional," works in public space since 1997. How do you understand public space?*
**Rafael Lozano-Hemmer:** I grew up studying people like Antonio Negri, who have advocated for a takeover of space in general, and of public space in particular. Though I'm not so engaged with his writings anymore, and not reading theory as much, I've always been inspired by the idea of taking and, more importantly, making space. Space cannot be taken for granted. The idea of public space that emerged after the French Revolution is in crisis. Cicero, Churchill, and many others have said that we make buildings and buildings make us. But in the globalized economy, buildings are no longer related to identity or to citizenship—they're the result of equations for the optimization of capital. For developers, architects, and urban planners, building solutions are the same in Singapore, Montreal, or Miami—it's a matter of optimizing investment. The result is homogenization of space. The flipside of this approach is a necrophiliac, vampiric, and nostalgic desire for authenticity, history, and identity. To "sell themselves," cities often go for late-19th-century lampposts and cobblestones and GAP stores instead of doing something passionately eccentric that interrupts the homogeneity. From my perspective, the artist needs to create interruptions—temporary platforms, as I call them.
**SF:** *The notion of platforms recalls the stage. You've discussed the importance of dance, theater, and puppetry in your work, and you define* Body Movies *(2001) as a kind of reverse-puppetry. Yet your work seems to open up a rehearsal space rather than produce a stage for performance. Does this make sense to you?*



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*Under Scan, Relational Architecture 11*, 2008. Robotic projectors, media servers, Pani 12kW projectors, scissor lifts, computerized surveillance system, and custom software, dimensions variable. View of work in Trafalgar Square, London.

**RLH:** I love that—"platform" gives too much emphasis to the actual stage, but "rehearsal" shifts the focus to the people and recasts the work more performatively. These interruptions, or rehearsal spaces, are community building. Some of the metrics at work in assessing the global city are quite problematic because they systematize all of the city's functions into very specific datascapes, mostly fed through surveillance. The democratic potential of public space is premised on heterogeneity. That prerequisite is disappearing—not only in traditional public space, but also in new public spaces such as the Internet. The public space of the electromagnetic spectrum is similarly besieged. For instance, if I want to distribute my content through the iTunes store, I need to have Apple's permission. Corporatization is at work not just in physical city spaces, but also in virtual, symbolic, and communicational spaces.

I'm not really a theorist of public space—I'm more interested in relationships. This word, "relationship," is very complicated. My first relational architecture texts and pieces came two years before Nicolas Bourriaud's texts. For me, the word comes from another lineage, including artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica and neurobiologists Maturana and Varela. It comes from the relational database platform, where things operate as a network of variables, not hierarchically. From the perspective of public art, I've been calling my work relationship-specific rather than site-specific.



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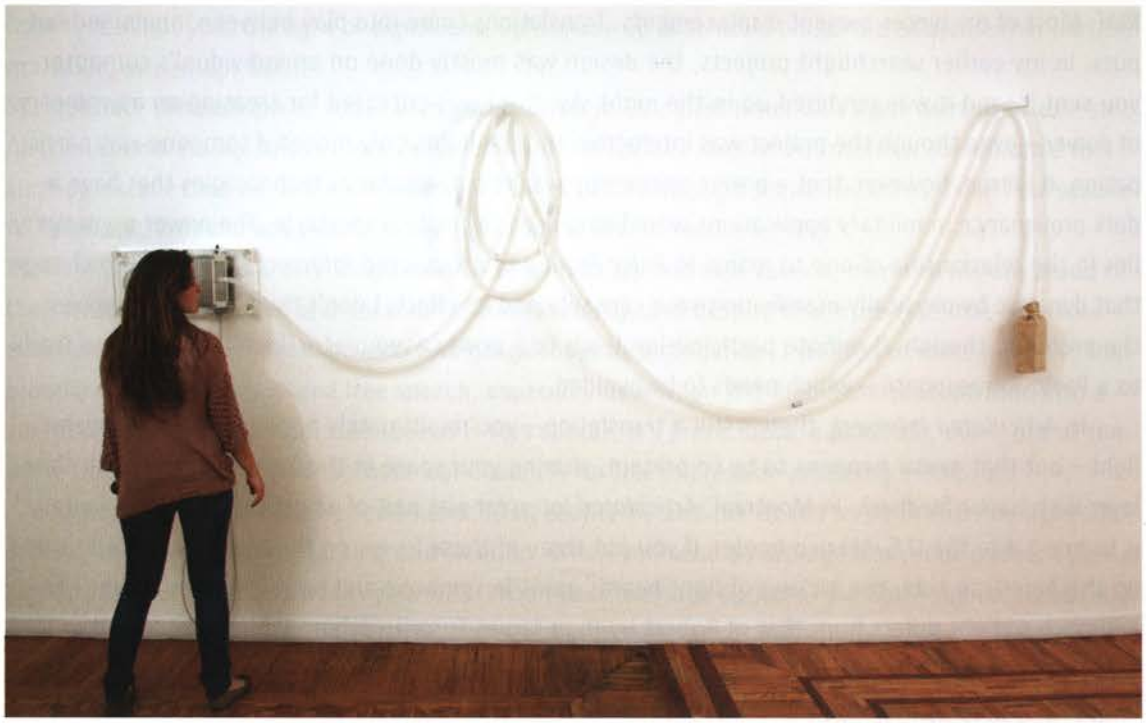
My heroes of art in public space include Krzysztof Wodiczko, Jochen Gerz, Hans Haacke, and Rachel Whiteread. But I want to propose something different and not so site-specific. Working with a site, I am inspired by certain accidents, but I think of my work as something that can and should travel. This kind of nomadic life gives meaning to the larger experiment. My approach has always been experimental in that I never try to outline the final objective politically or socially—my works are not prescriptive. The kind of politics that I'm interested in is not the idea of a deconstruction of the power narratives of a space or some kind of moral visualization of the technologies at work, but a search for the micropolitics of relationships—of tiny relationships that happen when we share disparate realities. For example, when people stumble into one of my works, they are briefly surrounded by a certain artificiality. This breeds complicity—and that's the moment that I'm looking for.

**SF:** *You make three types of public work. One uses biometrics to interact at the level of the body. Another involves acts of self-representation. And the third is a kind of message in a bottle, a representation that's launched into the universe. All three combine acts of love with acts of violence. In* Pulse Park *(Madison Square Park, 2008), one of the biometric projects, the decision to step into the rehearsal space of self-representation means that you will kick someone out, symbolically kill them. How does this work model the kind of politics that we're talking about?*

**RLH:** For me, what's really important is interpenetration. In art, participation is an act of creation—what you give is what you get. To get anything out of this work, you need to give. Many times that symmetry hasn't worked, but it does in *Pulse Park* because it becomes a metaphor, like a memento mori. It is "romantic," insofar as it ignores the impossibility of capturing the ephemeral essence of who we are. It's passionately useless, it takes the pulse—a measurement used for control, classification,

***Last Breath*, 2012. Motor, bellows, Plexiglas, digital display, custom circuitry, Arduino processor, respiration tubing, and brown paper bags, apparatus: 60 x 27.5 x 23 cm, tube: up to 15 meters long.**





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and health monitoring—and converts it into a matrix of light beams. Every time someone gets recorded, someone else is kicked out. You can say that the expelled person dies, or you can say that you liberate them.

(*Last Breath*, 2012), a project that I just did in Cuba, stores the breath of a person. Many Cubans are extremely superstitious, and the idea that someone's breath would keep circulating even after death was quite shocking. The moment when you unplug the work and let that breath go away is also a liberation. These two concepts—liberation and death—are intricately intertwined. In that sense, the work is suicidal rather than vampiric.

**SF:** *In* Pulse Park, Pulse Front *(Toronto, 2007), and* Articulated Intersect *(Montreal, 2011), the mechanisms and the event are co-present. The sculpture shares the space-time of the event. In* Pulse Park, *the killing or liberation is symbolic; in* Articulated Intersect, *playful sky drawing can turn into territorial conquest. When the searchlight that I manipulate crosses another one, the mechanism locks and the controller produces a physical feedback. Struggle resets the piece. Could you talk about the one-to-one relationship between the performer and the space in real-time? What is the role of feedback here?*

**RLH:** Most of my pieces present displacements. Translations come into play between inputs and outputs. In my earlier searchlight projects, the design was mostly done on an individual's computer—you sent it, and it was rendered up in the night sky. But I was criticized for creating an asymmetry of power—even though the project was interactive and the lights only moved if someone was participating. It is true, however, that a power asymmetry was in play insofar as technologies that have a dark provenance in military applications were being used to create a spectacle. The power asymmetry lies in the relationship of one to many. In *Pulse Front* and *Articulated Intersect*, I'm trying to change that dynamic by physically manifesting your causality and its effect. I don't think that this resolves the problem, though. If remote participation leads to a power asymmetry, local participation leads to a Pavlovian response—which needs to be avoided.

In *Articulated Intersect*, there's still a translation—you're ultimately acting through an avatar—light—but that avatar happens to be co-present, sharing your space in the form of a large articulated lever with haptic feedback. In Montreal, *Articulated Intersect* was part of an art event, but my fantasy is to bring it to the U.S.-Mexico border. If you put three of those levers on the Mexican side and three on the American side, the locking of light beams gains in symbolic and political importance. My approach to light differs from that of Robert Irwin or James Turrell—whom I admire very much. This is not a spiritual light or the light of enlightenment. I'm interested in the violent light of interrogation, of police helicopter searchlights looking for Mexican migrants at the border. I'm interested in the



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***Pulse Park, Relational Architecture 14*, 2008. Heart-rate sensor, computer, DMX controller, custom software, dimmer rack, 200 Source Four spotlights, and generator, lawn: 80 x 60 meters. 2 views of work in Madison Square Park, New York.**

light that blinds you, the light of explosions, light made up of schizoid photons that are neither particle nor wave, or perhaps both.

**SF:** Open Air *(Philadelphia, 2012) uses geolocation for the first time. This light work goes one step further in addressing surveillance by staging our complicity: we've internalized surveillance to such an extent that we willingly volunteer our locations through social networks, from Foursquare to Facebook. Why did you decide to use geolocation in this particular way?*

**RLH:** Philadelphia has a very long tradition of democracy and free speech; its residents are proud of their history of resistance and abolition. Simultaneously, and despite much promise, the city faces enormous challenges—from poverty and gangs to racial segregation. I wanted to make a project that proudly upheld and visualized free speech, especially now when the media are concentrated into a very few hands. To highlight free speech is very simple, it's predictable, a platitude, even; but at the same time, it's really urgent because our channels for free expression are being eradicated.

*Open Air* questions two phenomena: first, reality TV and the desire to be in the limelight and, second, the idea of police tracking and location. When you send a message from your phone, *Open Air* records your voice and tracks your GPS. When your message appears, the lights are automatically oriented toward you. They find you on the parkway, for instance, and create a halo that follows you everywhere you go. On the one hand, it's seductive because it stages participation—you feel like you're in the limelight. On the other, it's Orwellian and predatory. When 240,000 watts of power are



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directed at you, you begin to think about how to come to terms with this kind of *metric*. This word is important for me. We're being measured. Our challenge is to make that measurement visible.

**SF:** *The notion of rehearsal looks toward future relationships or performances, which is a nice way to think of the work's political dimension. In* Open Air, *when the searchlights turn on you, you suddenly realize that it involves more than you thought: you're also being tracked and surveilled. How can the work's modeling of political futures coexist with—or come about through—self-spectacle and surveillance-complicity?*

**RLH:** That's a fascinating question. It depends on the project, though I consistently take aim at a certain kind of idealism about entitlement. My objection lies in its uneven distribution: idealism is the privilege of people who are too entitled. Many other people are not entitled enough. For instance, *Voz Alta* (2008), a memorial commissioned for the 40th anniversary of the student massacre in Tlatelolco, is extremely specific about its interruption of a political process of dismissal or erasure, of an economic and historical reality, of a lack of media representation. How do we interrupt that situation? How do we create a platform for people to be entitled to their voice? In Mexico, this was very straightforward because everyone—from survivors to intellectuals, neighbors, and firefighters—needed this voice. In Philly, where the political process and the struggle for visibility and voice have unfolded differently, the project is abstracted. Here, you may find over-entitlement: people think it is their God-given right to say whatever they want. I don't feel comfortable with that. I don't think that this particular inoculated perversion of free speech—the reduction of freedom of expression to an empty entitlement and the redefinition of speech as meaningless blabber—is a universally important political message. Sometimes, like in Mexico, it's fundamental. If *Open Air* becomes a mere extension of reality TV—shout-outs and singing auditions—then I'm not doing it right. My project—my interest as a citizen—is to open up spaces for other voices to be heard. In Philly, every night, we have different things going on. We've worked really hard with different communities—seniors, Hispanics, women's empowerment advocates, cyclists, the homeless—to make sure that their voices are included. We understand that the platform itself is not going to solve the problem of disentitlement; to be successful, the project requires an intensive and sensitive outreach program.

**SF:** *It seems that in order to succeed politically, the platform has to mobilize conflict. Is there a danger that your work might, instead, become a therapeutic or cathartic space? How do you build antagonism into the interface?*

**RLH:** We go back to Brecht. He would say that you avoid hallucination or catharsis by making people aware of artificiality. This is one of the most important avenues for being self-critical, while simultaneously contributing to the dialogue. My work clearly relies on special effects, and so the simulation refuses a cathartic narrative. On one hand, the scale of my projects is often seductive, which makes them easy to compare to a Pink Floyd concert or a light-and-sound spectacle. At the same time, since I want people to engage the work with a certain intimacy, it fails to deliver on the promise of the fireworks display. That's why I keep referring to my work as a "fountain," as opposed to the proscenium, because the fountain does away with privileged viewpoint, linear narratives, and catharsis—it's simply constant transformation. The political expectations are very different, too, because the work neither asks a specific question nor seeks a given response. It does not stage a traditional adversarial conflict. Instead, it opens onto the work of agonism.

It's like Derrida said: deconstruction is the activity performed by texts that ultimately acknowledge their own partial complicity with what they denounce. If you are highlighting the predatory nature



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***Articulated Intersect, Relational Architecture 19*, 2011. Custom-built haptic levers, computers, searchlights, and DMX distribution, dimensions variable. View of work at the Triennale Québécoise, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.**

of police control, *you* are police control. That doesn't mean you can't do it, it just means that you know that you're complicit. You know that developing tracking systems, which my studio does, feeds a vicious circle. The futility of what I do gives it the freedom to be transgressive.

**SF:** *Your work always concretely materializes a space while activating a number of less predictable, immaterial dimensions, including the history of the site, imported memories, and on-line presence. Does this evolving work trigger moments of awareness, when certain potentialities might open up? Can the simulation empower people to carry that experience with them into other parts of their lives?*

**RLH:** It depends on the project. In Mexico, when we did our first searchlight project, we made a Web page for each participant, with photos of their designs and personalized, uncensored comments. This was crucial, because the Mexican people had been voting against the PRI for 70 years without any result. In this context, the fact that your participation produced actual transformation was symbolically meaningful to people. In other places, there is a sense of over-representation. For example, new technologies are almost always under corporate control. When you turn the corporate monologue into something interactive, you activate space. The most important political thing that I can do is to make my projects out of control. In them, nobody tells you what to do or what not to do. There's *never* censorship. In making that a fundamental part of the project, I'm hoping that people will become more aware of the pervasiveness of censorship, that they come to expect citizens to take a stance on the policing of interactions they can have with each other or with public space. If there's any hope, it's in designing malleable, weak—which also means flexible—forms that can be taken over in unanticipated directions.



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***Open Air*, 2012. Xenon 10kW robotic searchlights, Turbulent Heap content manager, webcams, Linux servers, GPS, Google Earth 3D DMX interface, iPhones, custom software, and cloud computing and storage, interactive area: 1 sq. mile, 10-mile visibility radius. View of work in Philadelphia.**

**SF:** *What is the role of memory in your work?*

**RLH:** Memory is malleable, it's a projection; in any given space, it's different for each observer. When you observe a memory or you make a monument to it, you change it, privilege different aspects. Brecht said, "Great Rome was filled with arches of triumph…who built them? Over whom did the Caesars triumph?" Every one of those monuments was erected on the repression of other, different experiences and worldviews—histories that have been erased, marginalized, or not represented. This is crucial to understanding memory. In my projects, memory is a place that can be visited. In *Voz Alta*, I wanted to make sure that those memories, which are recordings of survivors and witnesses to the massacre, were being played back, reactivated, reappropriated, mixed with the current situation in Mexico, which is still dire. I don't think about the preservation of memory, but about its perpetration. In Latin, "perpetration" means an act committed, and here it's a memory performed. It's a little bit criminal-sounding, but it also gives a sense of indeterminacy, of not knowing the outcome. "Preservation," on the other hand, is all about hindsight and the extension of objectivity. When I work with memory, I make sure that it is an active ingredient—one more reality (or bunch of realities) that needs to be co-present.

**SF:** *Public space and digital/social media space are absolutely entwined, but there has been a shift in their relationship. It seems that in order to effectively claim physical space, you have to first take over social media. How do you address this shift?*

**RLH:** The recent Mexican election was a very sad moment. We had a bit of democratic hope and now we're going straight back to the PRI. It happened, of course, through the normal manipulations pioneered by the PRI in everything from vote-buying to bullying, to making critics disappear and infiltrat-



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ing opposing movements. Having said all that, something really hopeful and exciting did happen: social media were used to distribute information in an unprecedented way. We—all Mexicans who care, which is the majority—*occupied* YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Thousands of documents show how the PRI stole the presidency. What I like is the change from raising our fists to putting up our phones. I finally got to see this icon, which we'd seen in the Balkans and in the Arab Spring, at work in Mexico. I don't think the PRI will be able to pull this off again. The ability to distribute this kind of alternative take on current events is only now reaching a significant part of the population. Of course, there will be a new kind of cyber war to stop this kind of expression, as we've seen with Ai Weiwei. Still, there is room to be optimistic about how these technologies put a check on monolithic power.

And so, I'm making drones as part of my art practice. In the studio, we are thinking about how to integrate helicopters into a project because we believe that whenever a new technology, especially a military technology, enters the world stage, it is our challenge to create something poetic with it. We need to use that technology to produce something critical that advances aesthetics by engaging our political and technological reality, which are one and the same. It's no coincidence that the first flocking algorithms were made at the same time as the first successful simulations of humans and the first intelligent bombs—these things go hand in hand. Technology today is imbued with our prejudices. We need to make that evident and inflect it with different prejudices.

**SF:** *Simulation, shape-shifting, mistaken identities, and dissimulation in plain sight characterize the rehearsals that take place in your relationship-specific works. Could you explain why these ideas are so crucial?*

**RLH:** The simulation is the hoodie, giving a certain kind of anonymity. But it is also the make-believe that allows you to penetrate, like a Trojan horse, into our reality—to dissimulate, but with a healthy sense of disgust or distance, have a shower after, and live your life. Great artists have always had alter-egos and created masquerades, and dissimulation is the key element that will allow the Bakhtinian carnivalesque to create spaces for variation, for creativity, for expression, for experimentation. Dissimulation, this shared pretense, which connects us to others, is a great source for hope.



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