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E-MUSIC

NEW MEDIA ART

Disturbing the system

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[RLH]

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is a Mexican-Canadian electronic artist developing large-scale interactive installations in public space, usually deploying new technologies and custom-made physical interfaces. Using robotics, projections, sound, internet and cell-phone links, sensors and other devices, his installations aim to provide "temporary anti-monuments for alien agency".
<http://lozano-hemmer.com/>

In your 'Relational Architecture' series of works there is a juxtaposition of two levels of reality: the 'public space' and the 'disembodied presence'. Once you said that "In public space there is the opportunity of self representation and intervention". How this can change (or is changing yet) our collective imagination related to this kind of space? It depends on the piece, but in general, as I work in public space, I am aware that in fact it is a very contested space where many realities already coexist. In my interventions I try to foster tensions or connections between these realities by means of "alien" platforms for participation, where people and places can have an excuse to behave with eccentricity, to dissimulate, to "not belong" to the prevalent reading or usage of the site itself. Perhaps this intervention can have an impact on how we can see

public space but in fact what I am more interested in is in the brief temporary relationships that emerge from the interaction.

In Vectorial Elevation the concept of 'remote presence' (or the feeling of 'here' and 'there') is tangible and the triggered social processes are playing on this very 'presence' concept. When, in your opinion, the concept of 'remote' will vanish (or has still vanished)?

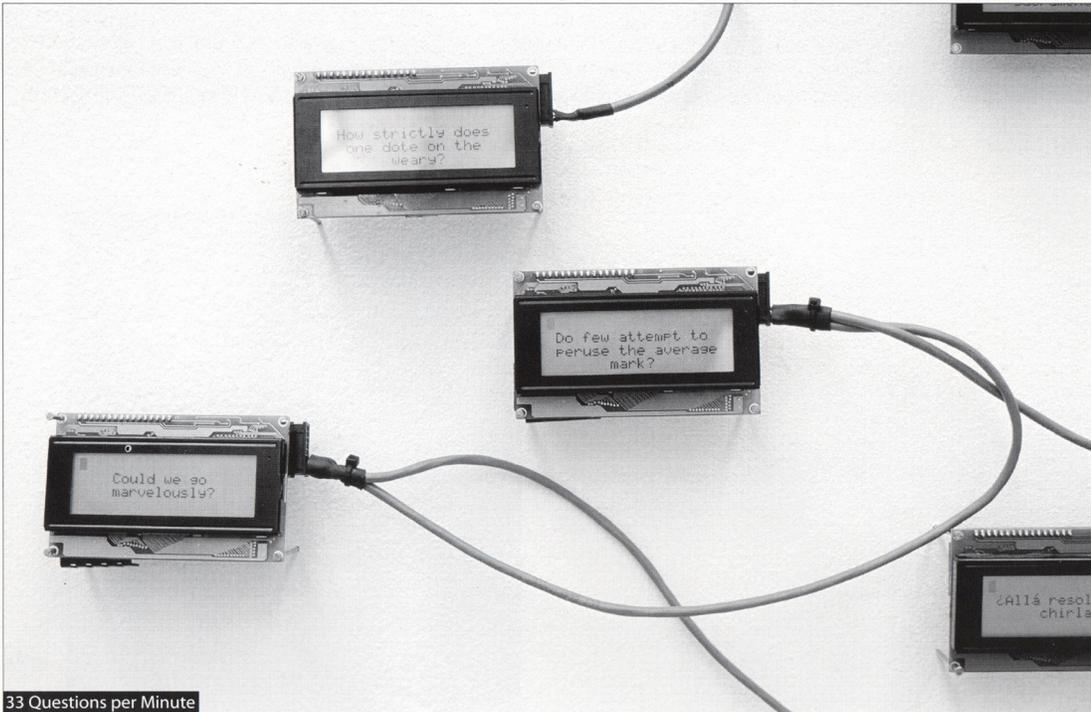
In Vectorial Elevation people on the Internet control 150,000 watts of powerful lighting that is typically used for rock concerts, advertising and corporate events. Those lights are normally beacons to get people to go to a place and once they are there they are passive spectators of a pre-programmed show. In Vectorial, if no one logs on and makes a design, the lights actually shut down and there is nothing to see. So in the piece there is no "here" without a "there". While this may true with events that are connected to the Internet, in general, in my opinion the concept of "remote" will never actually vanish—as McLuhan might have predicted—as one paradoxical effect of telecommunications is that they may actually remarginalize the periphery. For example, it is in part thanks to the globalized spread of information that people in poor regions decide—taking great risks—to immigrate, often leaving

behind a shortage of people that would be able/trained/prepared to improve local living conditions. Another example is the way in which telecommunications—often controlled by foreign multinationals—in fact speed up processes of economic dependency and cultural imperialism, and reduce local diversity. The gap between rich and poor is growing at an alarming rate, and most technological innovations are complicit with this growth. There will always be an "other" who is in a remote region who will suffer the consequences of our consumer lifestyle whether it be a toxic trash dump, child labour, or exploitation of natural resources. Finally, there is also a "remote" within us... and this will never disappear, by definition.

Furthermore the mere 'presence' becomes a recognizable identity in 'Standards and Double Standards' where the circular movements of belts are perceived as the circular rotation of an invisible human equator. Is our instinctive desire to meet other humans so strong that a moving belt can evoke a vision of an entire abstract human? Yes! I think we live in extremely solitary times. Loneliness is one of my favourite fears. However, in the case of "Standards" the motivation was to create a piece that would "materialize" surveillance by having these symbolic entities—belts that are fet-



vectorial elevation



33 Questions per Minute

shes of paternal authority-- react to the public. Originally I thought of the piece as a very Orwellian and predatory experience, but in fact there are people who found it pleasant and some even "erotic"! I enjoy being wrong about how people will read my work!

People use computers mostly looking for answers as some dot.com has quickly learned (Answer.com, Google Answers...). In '33 questions per minute' you put the machine in a strictly anthropomorphic territory: asking perfectly plausible questions, but maintaining its own overwhelming and database-grounded style. You said that "machine is a concept", how much are we really aware of the machines?

For "33" I wanted to create a "reverse Turing engine", where it would be impossible for the authorities to know if a question was generated by the computer or by a participant using the project's keyboard. The project was originally developed for the Havana Biennial, where Cubans were not allowed access to the Internet but as a Mexican-Canadian I could get access. So in my project local people could write a question on the keyboard and this would be camouflaged amongst all the computer-generated questions and then taken to the Internet. I would say in a place like Cuba people are more aware of the machines than we are elsewhere because they are harder to come by. In our consumer culture machines are completely subsumed in our identity, to the point that a recent advertisement has people saying "I am a Mac" and "I am a PC".

The invisibility of electronic surveillance and its pervasiveness and endlessness are clearly embodied in 'Subtitled Public'. Identification has always been (or has to be) invisible and non-stop, or this is only a characteristic of the electronic one?

There is a lot of new technology being developed right now for identification. These biometric technologies are crystallizations of panic and prejudice and they are fostered through irrational policies like the homeland security and the Patriot Act in the USA. Our leaders think that the solution to terrorism should be a technological solution. Cameras now try to classify you by ethnic group, they try to match you against a database of suspicious individuals, they have ample memory and efficient codecs in order to recreate the past. Fortunately, right now there is great art emerging that is addressing these new computer vision technologies... from people like David Rokeby, the Institute of Applied Autonomy and the Surveillance Camera Players.

You have been in the 'Vida' prize jury for many years, awarding electronic artworks that contain some kind of abstract life-forms. What is crucial, in your opinion, when you deal with anthropomorphic one? The Vida award is not just for abstract life-forms. In fact often what gets rewarded is work that abstracts forms from life, or that makes concrete elements of the life-like. There have been some works that are anthropomorphic, for instance Ken Feingold, Carlos Corpa and Mariela Cadiz, but it is true that many projects take on a decidedly post-human approach.

You said about your approach: "The act of seeing is the act of inventing". Isn't it the same mechanism related to the perception of the (digital) screen contents (trusting and constructing meanings on a retro-illuminated simulation)? And, on the contrary, the 'silence' (or interruption) you used in 'Body Moves' isn't temporary breaking the machine rules of continuity, and so this sort of supreme simulation?

Yes! And those break-ups are in fact tiny moments of freedom that must be cherished.

Talking about the interface, you said that you need it to be intuitive so it's not too distracting. So does it have to basically rely on our human instinctive gestures? And do you think that there are still many ancestral archetypes to disclose and exploit in mediated communication?

Having an interface that is "intuitive" is definitely useful because you diminish the amount of instructions needed to participate in a project. But I see "intuition" as a socially constructed entity not so much as an ancestral archetype. For example, one could say that a mouse is now an intuitive interface although there is nothing ancestral about that... it is just a function of our exposure to the device. I am now making a project with an echo-interface and I am finding out just how unintuitive it is to shout at an artwork!