

The Media City

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Performing Public Space

The piazza, in fact, is 'un-American'. Americans feel uncomfortable sitting in a square: they should be working at the office or home with the family looking at television.

(Robert Venturi 1966)

I think we are still stuck with this idea of the street and the plaza as a public domain, but the public domain is radically changing. I don't want to respond in clichés, but with television and the media and a whole series of other inventions, you could say that the public domain is lost. But you could also say that it's now so pervasive it does not need physical articulation any more. I think the truth is somewhere in between.

(Rem Koolhaas 1991)¹

One of the most striking and sustained explorations of the nature of public space in the media city has been the various 'Relational Architecture' projects undertaken by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and his long-term collaborator, Will Bauer (see Figures 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3). I want to discuss two works which were specifically designed for public plazas. The first, *Vectorial Elevation*, was staged in Zócalo Plaza (the common name for the massive Constitution Plaza) in Mexico City from 26 December 1999 to 7 January 2000.²⁶ *Vectorial Elevation* consisted of eighteen powerful searchlights mounted around the plaza, with the alignment of the individual lights remotely controlled by an internet interface. Internet users could log on to the site and design a lighting configuration to be displayed in public. The light patterns changed every 6 seconds, creating an aesthetic experience in which the intervals of movement were as important as the designs themselves. The software also automatically compiled a web page archive for each user, showing their design, camera pictures of its realization in the square and providing a space for their comments on the project.

The context of the work is important to appreciate. It belonged to the genre of 'millennium events' that gripped the world in the approach to the year 2000. *Vectorial Elevation* sat alongside other events, such as the live global telecast '2000 Today'. It took place on a public site overdetermined by multiple intersections of power. The Zócalo provides an architectural nexus for the dominant stakeholders in contemporary Mexico: the massive Cathedral, the National Palace and the Supreme Court abut the elegant jewellery shops of nearby luxury hotels. Yet the plaza is more than these official icons of religious, State and economic power. As Monica Mayer (2000: 225) comments:

But to this same *zócalo* comes feminists, gay rights organizations, religious groups, taxi drivers, policemen, street sweepers, punk rockers, nurses, Zapatistas, students, professors, and representatives of every political party, all with their proposals and demands. In the Zócalo the mass celebrates Independence Day every September 15.

Finally, *Vectorial Elevation* drew on the history of large-scale light display. Lozano-Hemmer (2002) explicitly evoked Albert Speer's notorious 'light dome' created for a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg in 1935, arguing: 'In Speer's spectacle of power, people were props, just like the searchlights were.' In contrast to such centrally controlled spectacles, which were designed with the aim of exerting maximum impact on the 'masses', Lozano-Hemmer aimed to use media networks to redistribute social agency in public space. As he later put it: 'I tried to introduce interactivity to transform intimidation into intimacy' (Lozano-Hemmer 2003). In contrast to what he called 'cultish extravaganzas whose effects were created to overwhelm the senses, to evoke false unity, or to provide a backdrop for mob rallies', Lozano-Hemmer's ambition was to create a 'dynamic agora' (Lozano-Hemmer 2003).

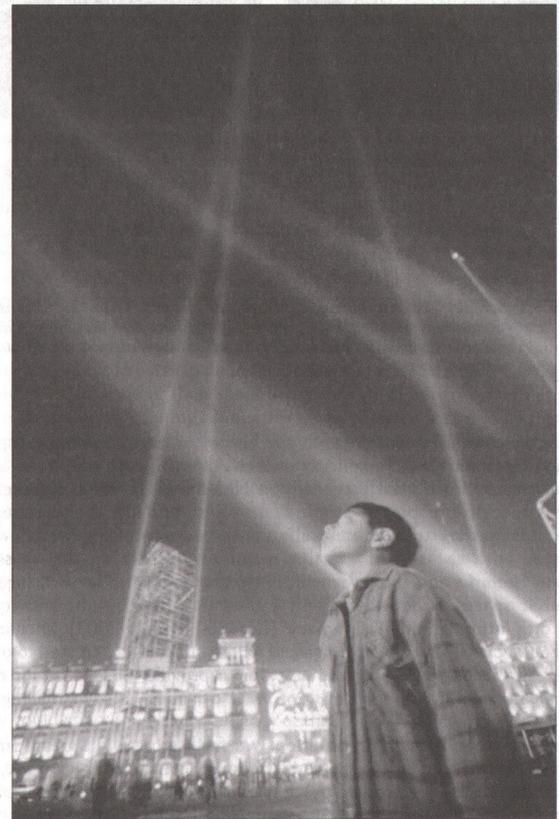


Figure 6.1 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, 'Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4', 1999–2004 (Interactive installation at the Zócalo Square in Mexico City and at www.alzado.net. Photo by Martin Vargas.)

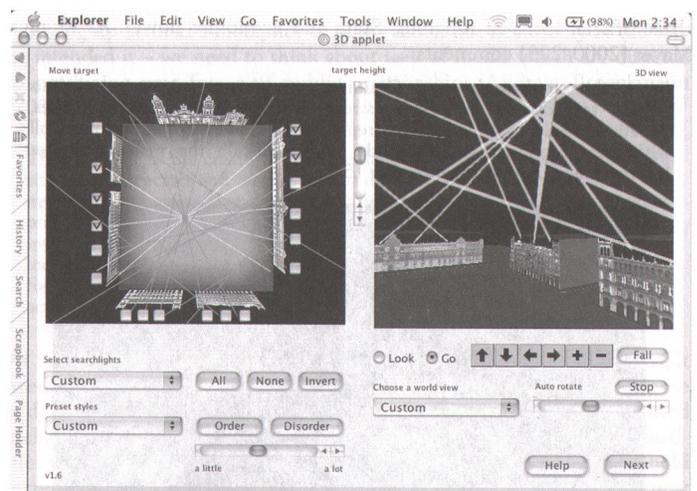


Figure 6.2 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Interface from 'Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture 4', 1999–2004 (Interactive installation at the Zócalo Square in Mexico City and at www.alzado.net. Photo by Martin Vargas.)

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The key to realizing this ambition was facilitating widespread public participation. Instead of a spectacle mysteriously controlled from above, the work utilized the decentralized capacity of the internet to offer participants the ability to intervene, even temporarily, in a public space of great scale. Arguably, it was more successful in this endeavour at 'net' rather than 'street' level. Erkki Huhtamo (2000: 108–11) notes: 'Giving any net user the opportunity to create a massive display for a real-life public space was a gesture that radically disrupted the logic of traditional public light shows.' The internet also enabled the emergence of a politically oriented, participatory public sphere in a Habermasian sense.²⁷ However, while user-configuration of the searchlights via the web created a more varied and whimsical light show than an 'official' choreography would have, at street level *Vectorial Elevation* was still primarily experienced as a spectacle.

The element of participation in public space was realized more successfully in Lozano-Hemmer's *Body Movies*, first staged in 2001 at the Schouwburg Square in the centre of Rotterdam.²⁸ *Body Movies* utilized large-scale images, comprising over 1000 portraits taken on the streets of Rotterdam, Madrid, Mexico and Montréal, which were projected onto the façade of the Pathé Cinema building using robotically controlled projectors. However, the portraits were rendered invisible due to powerful xenon lights saturating them from ground level. It was only when people walked through the square that the silhouettes of their interposed shadows 'revealed' the projected portraits. This emphasis on the physical presence of participants' bodies plays an important role in limiting the work's appropriation as abstract spectacle. *Body Movies* was more concerned with creating a ludic public space. This shifted the nature of 'interactivity', from its common guise of choosing from a menu of often predictable consequences, to a far more open horizon in which contingency and unpredictability assumed a greater role. Instead of the logic of 'taking turns', where single users controlled the apparatus or produced representations that others could see, many people could participate in *Body Movies* at the same time. Participants could alter the scale of their shadows by moving closer to, or further away from the building, creating silhouettes ranging from 2 metre to 25 metre in height. A camera-based tracking system monitored the location of the shadows in real time. When shadows matched all the portraits in a given scene, thus revealing the entire image, the control computer immediately changed to the next set of portraits. This complex interface created a delicate balance between personal participation and collective interaction, between active engagement and reflective contemplation. While it employed 'real time' interactivity, *Body Movies* was not simply about intensifying the 'now', but enabled a more diverse set of temporalities to emerge.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Body Movies* was the playful engagement it sustained among groups of erstwhile strangers who came together in public space and discovered that, by enacting a collective choreography, they could affect the visual ambiance of that space. Here it is worth recalling Benjamin's argument that the radical impact of cinema in the context of the modern city depended – like architecture – on the fact that it was consumed in a 'distracted' state. Since the film image acted at the margins of conscious perception, it was able to circumvent the habitual defence shield each city dweller erected so as to protect themselves from the excessive sensory demands of urban life. *Body Movies* occupies a similar liminal terrain. Passers-by aren't sure what to make of it; the interface is striking but not immediately comprehensible. Habit is suspended in favour of experimentation. Unexpected conjunctions emerge.

In contrast to the paranoia towards strangers that constitutes so much official rhetoric post 9/11, *Body Movies* celebrates the spontaneous alignments that can make genuine public encounters – in Sennett's terms encounters with *strangers* – so memorable. These kinds of tactical interventions into urban space provide a striking comparison to more manufactured 'media events', where the media simultaneously uses the lure of spontaneity in order to attract an audience, but generally occludes the spontaneous by imposing standardized frames in order to minimize the risk of 'nothing happening'. Rather than adhering to the cybernetic goal of informational speed and transparency, media technology in *Body Movies* becomes the basis for affective experience capable of sustaining reflexive public interactions. *Body Movies* takes the openness of relational space as the starting point for



Figure 6.3 Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, 'Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6', 2001–06 (Large-scale interactive installation featuring over 1200 giant portraits that are revealed inside the shadows of passers-by. First installed by V2 at the Schouwburg Square in Rotterdam. Photo by Jan Sprij.)

developing a dynamic and participatory social space. As Timothy Druckrey (2003) argues:

It is an evocation of the kind of social space in which active participation is not a by-product, but the driving force in the creation of dynamic agora in which every position is established in an open system that ruptures hierarchies and dismantles the notion that the public is an undifferentiated mass, the media not the harbinger of a utopian global village, interactivity not the opiate of shoppers.

Art which pursues this kind of trajectory is sporadic and marginal, and may well remain so. 'Transformable', 'responsive' and 'intelligent' architecture employing sophisticated new media is more frequently used to produce spectacle and facilitate individual consumption than to critique it. While experimental zones for space creation by 'nomadic inhabitants' have been built in many cities, they tend to be limited to highly controlled situations – theme parks, shopping malls, or 'events' such as rock concerts and dance parties. Yet refusing to recognize even limited possibilities for change is to help ensure it will not occur. Lozano-Hemmer's 'limited' games might well have been ridiculed by the Situationist International, who, in their ambition for the unlimited game of the radical transformation of life, might have taken comfort in the conclusion that the situation was not yet ready for total revolution. For those interested in a less *pure* politics, changing contemporary culture demands changes in the dominant social relations sustained by technological images. Practices which forge new ways of engaging with others in public are a critical element of any such change.

Notes

26 *Vectorial Elevation* was subsequently staged in Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain in 2002, in Lyon, France in December 2003, and most recently in Dublin, Ireland from 22 April and 3 May 2004 using 22 robotic searchlights. See www.alzado.net/ (accessed on 21 March 2006).

27 Lozano-Hemmer writes:

The web pages for *Vectorial Elevation* were created automatically for every participant and the comments field was there so that people could personalize their design with dedications, poems, political statements, etc. Those comments fields were completely uncensored, which was quite a feat at the time because the zapatistas were quite active electronically at that time. [...] I convinced the politicians that if we censored that then the piece would become only about censorship and that they needed to stop having a paternalistic and condescending view of the general public and trust that they will send interesting texts. Sure enough we had many Zapatista messages (thank goodness for that!) but also marriage proposals, soccer scores, etc. The point being that those comments were an important aspect in the takeover of a public space. (personal communication to the author 24 March 2006)

28 *Body Movies* has subsequently been staged in Lisbon, Linz, and Liverpool in 2002, Duisburg in 2003 and Hong Kong 2006. A video archive is at www.fundacion.telefonica.com/at/rlh/video/bodymovies.html