

THE ENGAGEMENT AESTHETIC

EXPERIENCING NEW MEDIA ART
THROUGH CRITIQUE

FRANCISCO J. RICARDO

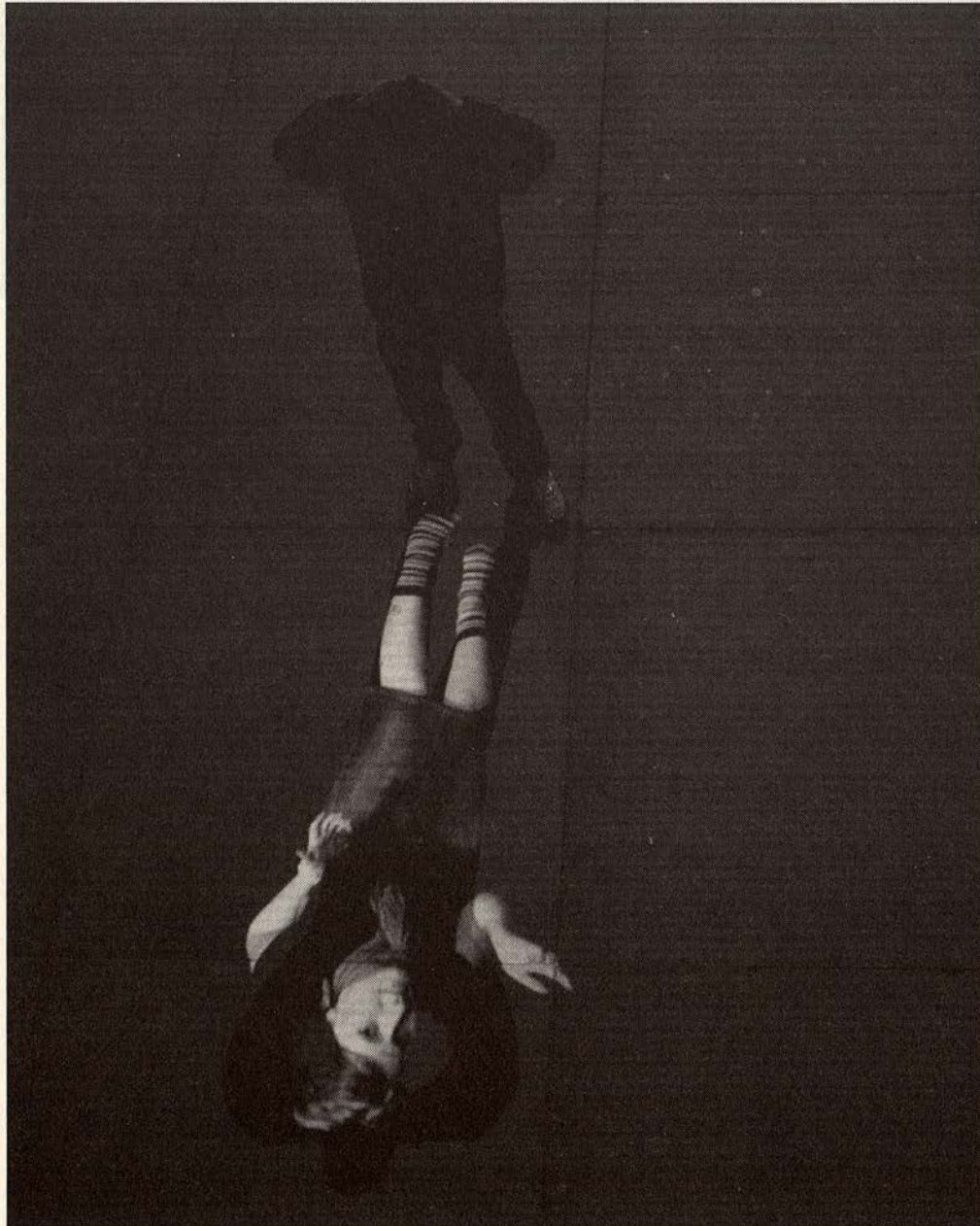


FIGURE 62 *Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Under Scan, Relational Architecture 11, 2008. Trafalgar Square, London, UK. Photo by: Antimodular Research.*

not the world of dance. One parallel is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Under Scan*, a work, first realized in 2005, that flooded space with an array of bright lights so that the strong shadows of passersby on the floor became backdrops to video segments greeting, gesturing, or provoking them.



FIGURE 63 *Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Under Scan, Relational Architecture 11, 2006. Castle Wharf, Nottingham, UK. Photo by: Antimodular Research.*

In this work, a computerized surveillance system with 14 video projectors and their servers drives a selection of pre-recorded movies through intensely bright projection. The movies portray individuals looking directly at the lens (hence the viewer), and provocations and gestures that are visible only in exact alignment with a viewer's shadow on the floor—such alignment is anticipated by the system's ability to track the motion of viewers and guess their next position in space. Any of the thousand or so pre-recorded video portraits, which are scaled and rotated to match the size and axial position of the viewer vis-à-vis the projector, can appear and will maintain eye contact as long as a viewer's body provides the shadow under which the portrait can "exist." When the viewer leaves, the portrait's attention wanders away, and the image fades out. Thus, the filmic is also sculptural, infusing the work with a séance-like aura, as if one plane of reality were being evoked by another. But every seven minutes the tracking mechanism has a chance to portray itself, when its visual reference system appears as a set of grids washing over the entire plaza.

Grids were of course the primary pattern influencing design in the twentieth century. The grid, as I have discussed in Chapter 5, was the flag of modernism, of the ideal, and of the collective. In the hands of De Stijl and Theo van Doesburg, and later those of Piet Mondrian, the grid held out the promise of harmonious unity after the horrors of World War I. The pure democracy of its form, in which every element is equal to every other, specifically disavows the prominence of groups or local differences. The grid was the opposite of the ornament in that it was created to *not* elicit an individual response, but rather to focus the eye on and dispose the mind toward totality. But *that* is also where the grid failed: it never connected to the individual soul, and as a program of any kind, was lifeless from the start. Despite its impressive purity and focus, De Stijl was politically irrelevant; and when it was adopted within Minimalism a half century later, that later movement, too, was faulted for its aloof disengagement from individual presence or perception.⁷ But in electronic art, the grid makes sense not as an ideal structure above human presence, as it does for example, in Sol LeWitt's lattices, but as *the* entry point for use, something evident in *Under Scan's* revelation of the grid as its tracking and processing roadmap. In earlier art, the grid is a fence between art and viewer; in electronic art, it is a necessity for engagement.

Andrew Neumann transposes the grid, Anne Spalter radializes it, Lozano-Hemmer maps it through sculptural projection. These are all performances in different degrees of engagement between art and its electronic support. Jewett's and DuBois's work, anchored in dance, electronic music, and visual computation, also extends the grid such that what constitutes a "performance" crosses a divide between virtual and actual. It is an empirical dialogue defined around conceptual choreography. This term, emphasizing the orchestration of movement, does not mean *dance*. I refer to a supercategory of movement expression through nonliteral dance, but dance does not address itself to what happens in its projective background, presented through a filmic plane. This quasi-autonomous filmic world makes *Blinking* more than a dance work. It extends modern dance into a post-narrative dialogue with a filmic world and a performative bridge through real-time shapes that generate several kinds of engagement from one space-time continuum.