BODY MOVIES

What if a building could breathe, gesticulate and emote in the manner of a living organism? *Body Movies*, an installation staged in Rotterdam, Netherlands, as part of the 2001 Cultural Capital of Europe festival, allowed the exterior of the city's Pathé Cinema to do just that. Giant shadow play initiated by pedestrians transformed the blank canvas of a 1,200-square-meter public square (the Schouwburgplein) into a dynamic performance stage.

Masterminded by Madrid, Spain-based electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Body Movies* was culturally contextual, inspired by Samuel van Hoogstraten's 1675 engraving, "The Shadow Dance." (The original Dutch print depicts a scene in which street actors' shadows—cast onto a wall from varying distances by a minute light source at ground level—take on alternately demonic or angelic characteristics.) In this vein, Lozano-Hemmer employed the same anamorphic optical effect, but with digital enhancements. Photographic portraits cast onto the building's façade via robotically controlled projectors were washed out by intense xenon lighting—that is until portions of each image materialized in the silhouettes of passersby. A camera-based tracking system monitored the coordinates of overlaid shadows in real time, using movement as an agent of change. Each time pedestrians willfully aligned their own shadows with the photos on the wall, the next sequence of portraiture was triggered. Antics naturally ensued.

Body Movies marked the sixth public exhibition staged in response to what Lozano-Hemmer decries as the current "crisis of urban self-representation."

Globalization has spawned a proliferation of generic "default" skyscrapers that no longer reflect local inhabitants or concerns, he says, causing a disconnect between cities and the people who inhabit them. At the same time, urban centers have been pickled by the preservation of what Spanish architect Emilio López-Galiacho calls "vampire buildings"—symbolic structures that aren't allowed to die a natural death.

"These are buildings that are kept alive artificially through restoration, citation and virtual simulation, forced into immortality by 'architectural correctness'—that cultural, political and economically conservative predisposition to assign an identitarian role upon a select number of buildings, like Vicenza's Villa Rotonda or Sevilla's La Giralda," Lozano-Hemmer observes. "The two phenomena of default and vampire buildings are flip sides of the same coin, but both define the exclusion of eccentric architectural readings."

Conversely, *Body Movies* enlisted citizens in a form of mutable graffiti. Juror Erik Adigard lauded the installation for its surreptitious appointment of pedestrians as harbingers of "storytelling, sculpture and super graphics." The melding of complex technologies with variable human behaviors yielded a tensile outcome he described as "at once restrained and bold, conceptual and visceral."

—JENNY SULLIVAN

Sullivan, Jenny. " Body Movies", *I.D. – Interactive Media Design Review*, vol. 49, no. 7, November 2002, p. 60.

[RLH]

EXPERIMENTAL

Q+A WITH RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER

How was this installation similar to previous interactive exhibitions in Madrid, Linz, Mexico City and elsewhere?

My work attempts to establish new relationships between people and urban environments that are suffering from rampant corporate takeover. I seek to build temporary, intimate anti-monuments in public spaces. In a typical installation, participants transform a site by controlling large-scale projections, robot lights and 3D sound, using tracking systems, Internet connections or other public interfaces. Body Movies was the first piece that used a computer-vision tracking system to monitor the location of projected shadows. This produced a very intuitive interface as everyone has a sophisticated vocabulary of expression using his or her own shadow. Therefore, it wasn't necessary, as in most electronic art, to explain how to participate.

You've described your installations as capitalizing on "alien memory." Please explain.

By this I mean memory that's foreign, that's non-contextual, that comes from a disparate plane of experience. Many times I use the word "alien" to replace the word "new" as an acknowledgement of the impossibility of originality. When I work in a public space, I don't try to address the "essential" qualities of the site, as site-specific installations do; rather, I emphasize artificial connections that may emerge from people interacting with alien memories.

Did pedestrians react the way you expected them to?

One of my key design objectives is to ensure that the piece is out of my control once it's set up. Since outcomes are not predetermined, behaviors can often be quite surprising. For instance, originally I thought the shadow interface would become a very expressionist device, almost noir. Yet people used it in playful, almost carnivalesque ways. I think a successful interactive installation is one that manages to surprise the author.

A video projection on the square gave pedestrians a naked view of the master computer interface—the so-called "man behind the curtain"—with a printed explanation in Dutch and English. Why was this important to include?

Artworks today listen to and look at the public as they relate to an external environment. All electronic art pieces establish mechanisms of surveillance. In my case, this was achieved by tracking people's shadows in real time. I like the Brechtian idea that we must show these mechanisms explicitly. It's what he called "noticing the knots." For me, it's a priority to demystify the special effects to make them instead "special causes and effects."

Staged in Rotterdam, Netherlands, as part of a cultural festival, *Body Movies* used anamorphic optical effects and digital enhancements. Portraits were cast onto a building via projectors and when pedestrians aligned their shadows with the photos on the wall, it triggered the next sequence of portraiture.

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