SCULPTURE CITY SAINT LOUIS 2014

INTERVIEW WITH RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER

Interview by Jessica Baran, conducted by phone.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer was born in Mexico City and currently lives in Montreal. His large-scale artworks—zassortedly described as social sculpture, relational architecture, interactive art and beyond—have appeared in expansive public spaces as well as intimate gallery and museum environs from Zurich to New York to Shanghai. He has received numerous accolades for his inventive and complex projects, including an NEA grant, a BAFTA British Academy Award and a Rockefeller-Ford Fellowship.

Lozano-Hemmer was the keynote speaker at the Monument / Anti-Monument Conference on April 12, 2014.

Open Air, Relational Architecture 19, 2013.

Jessica Baran (St. Louis)
I'm looking forward to your upcoming visit to St. Louis. Will it be your first?

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (Montreal)
I came once before in 2010, as one the finalists in the competition to redesign the Gateway Arch grounds. I was part of a team that also included Michael Maltzan Architecture, Stoss Landscape Urbanism, Richard Sommer and Buro Happold.

JB Your practice seems directly related to the upcoming conference's central concern, which is the idea of the "monument" and "anti-monument." Can you say how you think about these terms?

RLH Our traditional understanding of a "monument" is that it pretends to capture, represent, remember or celebrate a moment in history or the figure of some great leader. In Mexico, for example, there is a tradition of imposing a monolithic, didactic, pedagogical, cathartic, privileged point of view to encompass, in an exhaustive way, a particular historical vision. Instead, the projects I've been installing work with the micro-politics of the live, general public. My work often takes over public space and allows people to personalize it, and I find that to be a very political act—not so much the fact that they are relating to an architectural site or history, but more that ad hoc relationships are emerging in that space. Revitalizing public space means to me that people who have very disparate backgrounds or realities can coexist and interact in the same time and place, without becoming an average, a cohesive community.

The main problem I have with most monuments is indicated by the Bertolt Brecht quote, "Great Rome was filled with arches of triumph. Who built them? Over whom did the Caesars triumph?" The idea is that, behind each one of these arches of triumph is a minor history that's been erased. Eccentricities and plurality of voices get subsumed. So, behind each monument you have the violence of the exclusion of others. To approach a project anti-monumentally is to first of all, acknowledge your own partial complicity with what you're denouncing, typically power asymmetries. Once you've acknowledged that complicity, you must create interruptions in the narratives of power.

JB St. Louis is a city defined by enormous economic and racial disparity. Even architecturally, the city is very strictly defined and, in turn, defines its different populations. Not championing the "winners" of history, but those so-thought secondary narratives, is really powerful. Our city often sees itself in the shadow of larger "centers" in the US—larger art centers, larger economic centers, larger urban centers. So, St. Louis itself could be considered one of those secondary, or shadow, narratives.

As space and location are so deeply charged here—St. Louis City and St. Louis County, for example, are on nearly opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum—a project based in one place over the other will inherently have a very different meaning. I'm interested in how location factors into your work?

RLH It doesn't very much. Certainly the backdrop of my work in public space is site-specificity, which includes a large tradition of artists I admire such as Krzysztof Wodiczko, Jochen Gerz, Rachel Whiteread and Hans Haacke. Many of them study the master narratives of a particular site and then deconstruct these. This kind of site-specificity is so successfully realized by artists like Wodiczko that I don't want to do the same thing. I need to find my own practice.

Another kind of site-specificity is community-based. This is a very prevalent, pervasive approach, not just in the US, but in Latin America and elsewhere. There are a lot of artists trying to address the plurality of a community or the particularity of a community. This is what Edward Said called "identitarian approaches" to art or representation or politics or writing.

I am not really against, but beside both of these approaches. I consider my work neither site-specific, nor community- or socially-specific. What I call my work is relationship-specific. Emphasizing relationships allows the work to be part of a performance, a flow, a connectivity. Not a *collectivity*, which, in my opinion, is a very problematic concept, especially coming from Latin America. In the name of collectives, some of the absolutely worst art has been produced. Connectivity, on the other hand, is a concept that respects differences—all it does is create platforms for temporary connections between disparate entities. Relationship-specific artwork is specifically designed to travel, it's designed to move through different communities, different institutions, different cities. Sometimes, relationship-specific work connects disparate communities and neighborhoods; other times it doesn't. But as it tours and people engage with the work, different behaviors emerge that are specific to the interaction itself.

As a Mexican, I tend to shy away from notions of the social. Most pedagogical, didactic, moralistic positions I find really distasteful, so I try to make an effort to create work that is not—there's a beautiful word in English—*prescriptive*. It does not come with an objective, a teleology. Anti-monumental art should be more of an experiment: put certain ingredients in public space and then hope that people will react to or with them. Or perhaps we can think of the anti-monument as a party. My parents were nightclub owners. A good nightclub has great music and ambiance and drinks. But, really, it's people who ultimately make a place memorable, who make a good party, who make a scene a scene. And that's exactly the same as my definition of an anti-monument, because an anti-monument should have no presence whatsoever, except for that given by the public.

JB That's so well stated! I wonder about this use of relationships—relationships are a kind of effect rather than a cause, at least when you're just beginning. They can become a cause, ultimately, but you have to foster a relationship first. So where does one start?

Also, in trying to move yourself, as you said, besides certain ways of thinking, I feel you inevitably do take a position. For instance, I can't imagine you would want to endorse a hegemony or dictatorial power structure, especially as you alluded earlier to wanting to uncover the eccentric narratives, the shadow narratives. That definitely feels political in my mind.

RLH I don't want to do that. That's what site-specificity does. I'm generalizing, that's a huge category, but the people that I'm interested in, artists like Wodiczko or Jenny Holzer, that's what they do: they uncover those minor histories. I'm not doing that. I'm trying to establish very artificial conditions, an experimental platform.

JB You're remarkably sensitive to how your work operates non-repetitively amidst collective art-world impulses, especially of the social practice variety. Almost despite itself, even that field has become homogenized, at least in terms of people's expectations for it. It's certainly harder to plumb gray areas, defy expectations.

Getting back to the conference theme, do you refer to your work as sculpture? If so, does that provide a productive lens through which to think about your work?

RLH Yes, I've referred to my work as sculpture. Sometimes I refer to my light pieces as light sculptures. They are space-makers. When you are making space, when you're mulling it over, when you're changing it, there is that understanding of the spatial. You have to be very, very open about what constitutes a sculpture to call what I do sculpture. If you consider articulated pieces sculpture, then, yes, mine are sculpture. If light can be a sculptural element, then yes. All of those are good questions for the medium of sculpture. It's a word people may use if they'd like. If they have a more militant or fundamentalist understanding of sculpture as simply an object, then I'm happy to opt out.

Voice Tunnel, Relational Architecture 21, 2013. Photo by James Ewing

Pulse Spiral, 2008. Photo by Antomodular Research

JB How do you situate your use of cyber-technology in your work? *Friendfracker* (2013), for instance, seems inherently critical, in the way that many political movements use interventionist strategies and disassemble power structures from within.

RLH I work with technology because it's inevitable and impossible not to, not because it's new or special. That's what we call "technological correctness." It's the natural condition of our time. Our politics, our economy, our environment, globalization itself; the shared language is technology. It's impossible to create an artwork, even if you're a painter, that is not going to be technological to a degree. The public viewing your work, for example, is watching an average of eight hours of screen time a day, whether it be on a cell phone, or a computer, or a TV. Ever since Marshall McLuhan, we've known technology is a second skin. It's not optional. We cannot be outside of it. Pol Pot tried to be outside of it, but that didn't work out, as we know. By accepting technology as a language, as something that is inherent, we can think of it not as a tool, but as part of ourselves.

As I'm using technologies, I am conscious of the fact that they are not neutral. Most developments originate from military or corporate research, which imbues them with Orwellian, gendered, asymmetric values. One must admit that one is a part of the problem when one uses these tools: we are all complicit with the society of control. Many of my works feature tracking systems that detect the presence of people and react to their presence. You can say these are works about participation and inclusion and complicity, but you can also say that they are about policing and predatorial vision and certain assumptions and prejudices that are inherent in technology and the format itself. So, conscious of that, you still do it, hopefully with a poetic or critical result.

It's similar to public space. There's no such thing as a neutral public space. As we know, public space in any city is already layered with all sorts of different projections, from colonization to urban planning. There's an acknowledgment that no one is working from a blank slate. Similarly, technology, as I said, is a language already shaped by its evolution.

JB Are the "public commons" now truly digital? That language, of course, has been deliberately assimilated into internet-speak.

RLH Now that we know that digital privacy is extremely uncommon, more than ever, the internet should become a public space. It's very important to make that a reality, because the alternative is, for instance, Apple's ecosystem of iTunes, where all of the content is curated by people who decide what is and is not appropriate. Or worse, an authoritarian-network with filtered options. That vision is sadly winning and is in clear contrast to the idea of public space—of people using the internet as a platform for self-representation, and of net-neutrality. We can all occupy that space.

JB Your work often pairs very complex, machine-oriented engineering with, say, human breath or paper bags—that is, simple analogue items. These juxtapositions create a wonderful alignment of technologies—high/low, new/old, non-human/human—and proves them to be equals. How are your indoor works, in museums, for instance, different from your outdoor pieces?

RLH In museums, I tend to emphasize that the virtual and the real, just like absence and presence, are not two mutually exclusive concepts, but rather ones with a lot of interpenetration and porosity. Often, we materialize data and track materials. The juxtaposition you speak of is more than just collage, it is often an actual translation, metaphorical or real, between different states in the virtual-real continuum. But the indoor and outdoor pieces have similar themes of self-representation, co-presence, intimacy, performance and so on.

For my work outdoors, I like to think of my projects as fountains or special effects. I like the idea that, as a result of my projects, public space becomes something singular that invites people to occupy it for a purpose

Make out, Shadow Box 8", 2008. Photo by Antimodular Research
Vicious Circular Breather, 2013

other than shopping. Cicero, Churchill and others have said, "We make buildings and buildings make us." This is far from true in our contemporary situation: buildings today represent capital. New buildings in St. Louis or Mexico are similar, as they're the results of formulas to optimize investment. We're seeing this enormous homogeneity of our cities. Part of my job is then to make proposals that render public space eccentric. How do we create interruptions of the narrative of corporate takeover and create opportunities for civic occupation?

JB This kind of homogenization you're describing seems mostly suburban in the US. The cities themselves have been abandoned, maybe because they actually retain an un-burnished and idiosyncratic texture. Elsewhere—in cities like, say, Singapore—economic booms have created mass rashes of high-rise housing projects. In the US, I feel like we still think we have land to burn.

RLH I think homogenization is taking place in city centers too. When politicians talk about "revitalizing a city center", they imagine placing 19th-century lampposts, cobblestones and Gap stores. An architect friend of mine, Emilio López-Galiacho, calls "vampire buildings" this cult for stylistic revival in search for authenticity. He sees a kind of necrophilia in dead buildings that get "refreshed" with faux historicism. Instead of trying to appeal to diversity, vibrancy or eccentricity—the things that actually bring the creative class into cities, which most politicians want to do—they choose to make them look exactly like everywhere else. One solution to this is to design risky, out-of-control proposals for people to take over their city.

JB Something else I was curious about: much of your work is power-dependent and, I also assume, costly to create. How do you reconcile your financial and environmental realities with your ideological concerns?

RLH That's a very important question because I do run into all sorts of logistical and financial situations in my work, and resolving them properly is part of the project. Creating open conditions for the misuse and perversion of these expensive technologies is difficult. A lot of the projectors I use, for instance, are designed for the Olympics or large corporate events, with price tags much beyond what most artists can pay. Trying to convince the different supporters of the projects, both private and public, that it's in their best interest to use these technologies not to advertise or push a particular monologue onto people, but rather to create forums for self-expression, is an ongoing passion of mine.

I like to talk about money a lot. Artists often see it as a taboo subject, as we're all invested in this myth of the bohemian artist. In the end, that myth is just another trap set by collectors, galleries and museums so they can exploit our work while we're stuck in survival mode. So, I like to talk about money, because money allows one to have a certain degree of autonomy and independence.

My proposals discuss exactly the ways in which corporate support can take place within one of my pieces. You'll notice that most of my public projects are in Europe, Asia, or Latin America, but not so much in North

Open Air, Relational Architecture 19, 2012.

America. Partly because North American corporations expect that their support will result in their brand converting public space into some kind of Grand Prix banner. I heard a museum curator aptly call it "logo creep." What I've explained to them is that the moment a project's turned into an advertisement, you lose the trust you've established with the public; and that ultimately backfires on the company and myself.

Most of my projects are funded through private and public sources. I go out of my way to ensure that they feel their investment is worthwhile without it necessarily becoming an advertisement or imposition. For example, my big shadow-play "Body Movies" cost somewhere between $300k and $400k to be installed for a couple of weeks. Typically, we will not have any logos in public space. When the project begins, credits roll on the big projection mentioning the name of the festival or biennial, the photographers' names, the programmers and then finally an acknowledgment to the sponsor, with their huge logo, which appears for 3 seconds. Then it disappears, the credits end, and the project begins. Never again does any kind of logo appear. The distinction between the credits and the piece is perfectly determined, and people totally get it, I think—seeing the support as a kind of corporate civility.

JB Do you vet the corporations from whom you accept funding, in terms their ethical standards?

RLH I'm not very moralistic. I've worked with tobacco companies, telephone companies, electrical utilities, and so on. I do not in any shape or form pretend to have an impeccable ethic when it comes to my sponsorships. But, I do have limits. I was working with NASA on a proposal, and when they said they'd found a sponsor and it was Lockheed Martin, I said absolutely not. They said they had a civilian program, and I said I didn't care if they had a civilian program. I'd rather pass. My black list is not very long. It's Lockheed Martin. It's Televisa—the private TV monopoly that's always been complicit with the power regime in Mexico. Other than that, I'm open. The important thing to determine with my sponsors in advance is what their expectations are. I'll give you an example: BMW wanted one of my pieces to be shown in the main square in Frankfurt during the auto fair. I was fine with that, except they wanted a Mini Cooper to drive in front of my projection every five minutes. I said no. Which is kind of unfortunate, because I could have supported my entire studio for a year with that commission!

JB There's, possibly, a mitigating rationale for accepting these sponsorships: they help realize projects that may change people in very deep, positive ways. So, were certain sponsorships not accepted, the projects would go unrealized and people wouldn't have access to a possibly revelatory experience. It's definitely complicated.

Along similar lines, I wonder to what extent you consider power usage in your projects?

Articulated Intersect, Relational Architecture 18, 2011. Photo by James Ewing

RLH When I did my *Vectorial Elevation* (2010) project, the searchlight project for the Olympics in Vancouver, I was using 250,000 watts of power. When we first announced the project, I was immediately criticized for its energy consumption. The CBC national media went so far as to call my artwork the equivalent of an "Environmental 9/11." So, I had to explain that, yes, 250,00 watts of power was a lot, but it was only 1/20th of what a typical hockey game uses. That was great, because Canadians especially love their hockey, and this comparison gave them a metric for understanding how much a lot of power really was.

The second thing we'll do whenever we're using large amounts of power is go for renewable energy. I'd say 90% of our projects are powered by hydro-electricity or biodiesel.

The third thing we do is invest in zeroing our carbon footprints. There are different programs all around the world—in the US there's the Nature Conservancy, which allows you to pay an amount of money to offset the carbon you're generating through sequestration, reforestation, or other approaches.

Finally, we always work with scientists and environmentalists to make every effort to mitigate the project's impact on local fauna. For example, for a recent installation in Philadelphia we worked closely with the Audubon Society to ensure that we did not disturb migrating birds. We rented a Doppler radar, which detects the movement of flocks of birds, and whenever the birds would fly through the piece, we would mask it, mute and turn parts of it off.

JB Earlier you said you don't mind your public works being described as fountains or as special effects. I was thinking about this in terms of nightclub ambience and your family's history. There's something anarchic about the use of spectacle-driven effects: they induce pleasure. People experiencing pleasure and being invited to play is an incredibly difficult thing to control in terms of politics and ideology. It's a kind of embodied state that rises above all of those identity-prescribed problematics you were pointing out earlier. I'm curious to what extent a goal in your work is to—

RLH To party?

JB Yes! Or create joy. A party is one way to produce that affect. They also bring people from radically different circumstances together.

RLH There's a beautiful set of texts by Mikhail Bakhtin about the carnivalesque—these temporary interruptions of the city and of your own identity, when you get lost in the crowd. I think that's fundamental to civility. We are evolutionarily predisposed to have these expressions of connection and disappearance. What's unnatural is to keep people in their cars, disconnected hormonally, but tracked at all times. We are trying to use technology to reconnect us to people, but we are failing miserably. Public space and proper public development offer a diverse range of activities, all of which are conducive to a safer, more democratic state. That's, of course, a very romantic and utopian statement, but I do believe that interventions in public space are one solution.

Some of my projects have failed, but then others have come through. So, it is just like a club: you set things up and hope people will come in and make it a scene. If they don't, it's ok. It's still interesting, so you move on and do something else. The party aspect—what you're calling anarchic—is the fundamental sense of entitlement we need to restore in our cities.