

The Fifth Floor

Ideas Taking Space

CV
Born in 1967 in Mexico City, Mexico. He lives and works in Montreal.

His work has been commissioned for the Expansion of the European Union in Dublin (2004); the opening of the Yamaguchi Centre for Art and Media in Japan (2003); the United Nations' World Summit of Cities in Lyon (2003); the Cultural Capital of Europe in Rotterdam (2001); and the Millennium Celebrations in Mexico City (1999).

Group shows include those at the Biennale di Venezia (2007); Sydney Biennial (2006); the Shanghai Biennial (2004); the Liverpool Biennial (2002); the Istanbul Biennial (2001); and the Bienal de la Habana, Cuba (2000).

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Interview by Pip Laurensen¹

Pip Laurensen: Could you describe *Subtitled Public* to someone who has not seen it?

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: It is an installation that takes place in an empty room where there is a surveillance tracking system that detects people as they walk by. As you enter the space there is nothing to see except even blue-purple lighting; the tracking system then detects you and projects a word onto your body. As you move around the space back and forth or left and right the word stays glued onto your body and 'subtitles' you. The only way to get rid of this word is if you touch somebody and rub off the word onto them or if you leave the room. The words are all verbs in the English language conjugated in the third person. So for example 'bites', 'criticizes', 'laughs', 'sleeps', etc.. and these action words get projected onto your chest. The project exists on the borderline between being a violent kind of predatorial visualization of surveillance, because you really are branded as a subject, and being a playful interface because you need other people to tell you what your particular word is. So it becomes almost festive because people are not used to looking at each other in a gallery space, let alone touching each other.

PL: What inspired you to work with this type of technology?

RLH: For the past ten years I have been very interested in how computerized surveillance is preparing us for a very different kind of art. I have studied and admired artists who have worked with closed circuit TV. People like Julia Sher or Dan Graham. But today we are dealing with a very different kind of computerized surveillance. Cameras try to detect ethnicity for instance, or they try to take your image and compare it to a database of suspicious individuals. So clearly the cameras now have a certain sense of agency or executive control, they take decisions based on built-in prejudices. I'm troubled by this. I'm not moralizing about this, it is what we have, but to me it is important to create art that perverts this kind of computerized surveillance. When I say perverts I mean to be playful with, to criticize, to make absurd, but

also to make tangible, to bring it into light. A lot of the work that I have been doing with computerized surveillance is from the very simple conceptual device of imagining what would happen if we took all these cameras that are observing us all day at the workplace, or in the streets, or in our homes, and instead of cameras they all became projectors. So what if instead of taking images away from us they gave us images and I think this would make for a safer and more connective world. Although it is a utopian position it is a departure point for thinking about making tangible the surveillance, allowing us to become aware of it. In this way questioning who the observer is and who is the observed. A lot of these works come from that inspiration but they are not limited to it.

PL: You started working in the electronic arts area and then you moved more to the museums and fine art spaces. Can you talk about that transition?

RLH: I'm not working with technology because it is new; I detest the concept of newness and the future and so on. Technology is the inevitable language of globalization; it controls our economy and it takes our culture. Even if you are not working with computers, say you are a painter, you are making technological art. In Britain the average person watches four hours of TV a day and McLuhan would say that makes you inseparable from the media. So if you take that position then you realize, as Gary Hill says, that everything is interactive. It is not really a necessary requirement now to hang around an exhibition whose only linking strategy is the fact that it is based on a computer. The specificity is not based on the medium itself but on the relationship that it establishes.

PL: To the viewer?

RLH: Yes, to the participant. This is a fundamental thing in my work; I admire very much the work of site-specific artists like Krzysztof Wodiczko, Hans Haacke, Jochen Gerz and so on. But because I admire them so much I separate my practice from them and try to think, not about site-specificity, but about relationship-specificity. These projects can be represented

and replicated in different ways so long as I lay out the constraints and behaviours of what that platform is: openness and a certain out-of-control element is what I welcome in the project. It can be recreated and there is a certain curatorial flexibility of how this is represented because I want this project to survive not by virtue of the means with which it is made but by virtue of the connections that can happen. I'm often very excited by seeing projects mature in different contexts; so for instance a project such as *Subtitled Public* is a project also about the gaze and the distance between people and so on and so forth, and I'm very curious to see how that project will react in England compared to how it did in Mexico. I don't see *Subtitled Public* as a timeless project, I don't have the desire or presumption of universality that, say, modernism has. I genuinely see my work as a special effect, an experiment, and I have no shame in saying so. To me the emphasis is on the performative. It's not pre-programmed, you don't know what word you are going to get. That makes it special, that gives it a different reading every time. Your experience of *Subtitled Public* will always be unique. Benjamin's notion of the aura disappearing with mechanical reproduction is now superseded because when you walk into *Subtitled Public* your reading is a unique function of what word you got at random, plus who else is in the room and what words they have and how they walk around you – do they touch you for instance? If somebody gets the word 'masturbates' it really does affect your reading of that piece. So that specificity is maintained. The artwork will never be completed without a public. The public that will see it in 2008 is very different by definition from the public that will see it in 2020. Viewers will one day walk in and say 'Oh, this is when artists questioned the neutrality of exhibition spaces because cameras bloomed everywhere'. They will remember that *Big Brother* was premiered a year before that and they will make links to that because I'm not pretending to be outside that culture around it, I'm a product of it.

Notes

¹ Excerpt from a conversation recorded in London in February 2008. Pip Laurensen is Head of Time-based Media Conservation at the Tate in London.

[RLH]

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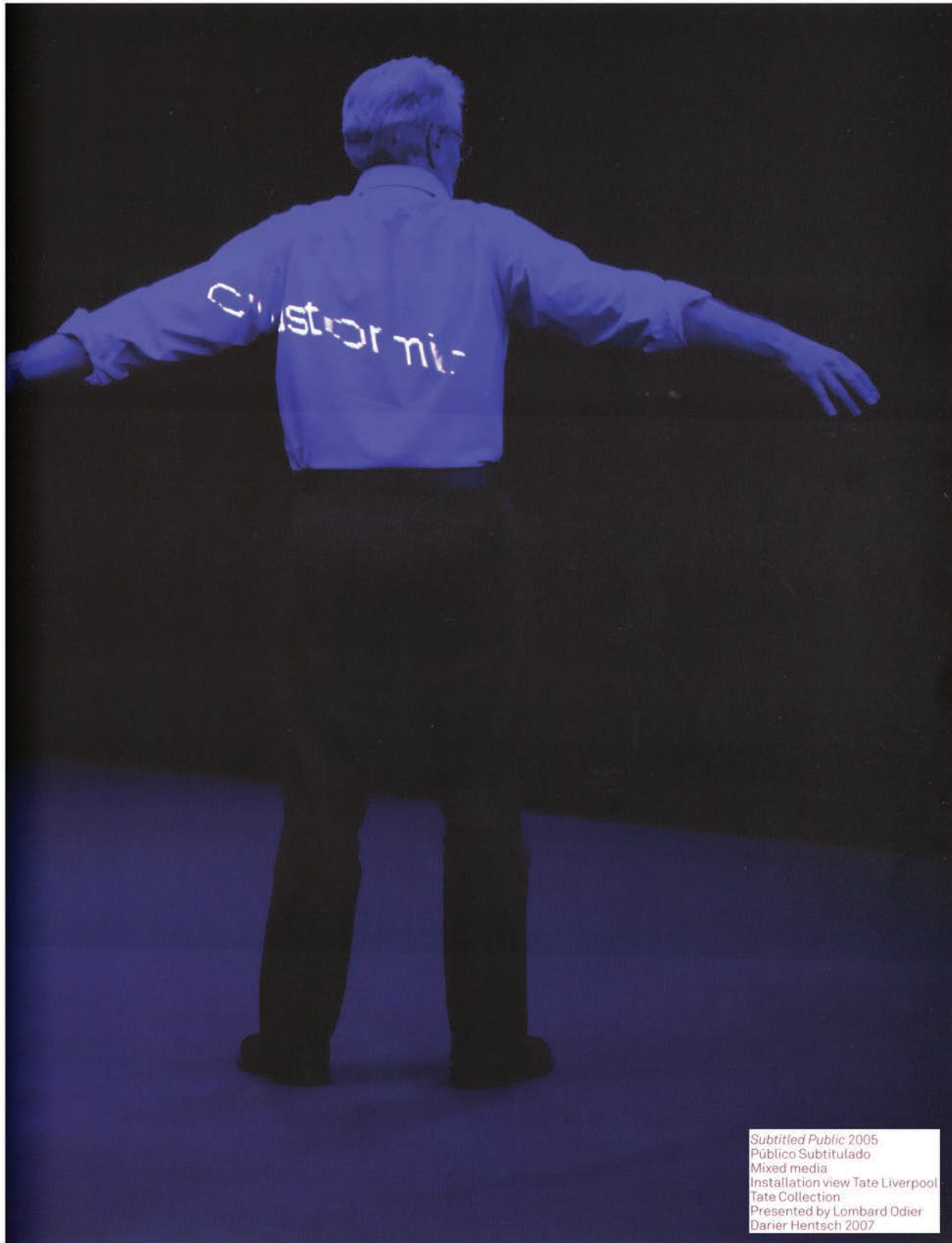
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Subtitled Public 2005
Público Subtitulado
Mixed media
Installation view Tate Liverpool
Tate Collection
Presented by Lombard Odier
Darier Hentsch 2007

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Subtitled *Public* 2005
Público Subtitulado
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