



Left and top right: "Displaced Emperors, Relational Architecture No. 2." Bottom right: "Re: Positioning Fear, Relational Architecture No. 3."

monitor
WHO TO WATCH | WHAT TO WATCH

CITIES OF LIGHT
RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER'S ARCHITECTURAL REVISIONS

Whether he's using the slate-black domes over town squares at night or the broad faces of historic buildings, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer makes the cities we inhabit into his canvas so that we may reclaim them as our own. "From Cicero to Churchill, people have said, 'We make buildings and buildings make us,'" says the Mexican-born artist. But, too often, architecture's roots to humanity are betrayed through bland international designs, which homogenize urban landscapes from Cleveland to Cairo, and an almost severe devotion to restoring decrepit structures. These buildings, he says, possess "alien memory," shackled to another time or place, and they should be allowed to die with dignity.

He metaphorically strips the scaffolding from these "vampire buildings" and gives us instead dancing images born of light and shadow – ephemeral, intangible and sometimes heavenly. His "Relational Architecture" projects, which he defines as "the technological actualization of buildings with alien memory," use searchlights, high-power projectors and myriad digital gadgets to give participants in these public displays the rare opportunity of redefining spaces that haven't changed, in some cases, for centuries.

Unlike Christo, whose "wrapped" buildings beg the public to re-examine structures of power but carry the message "This is big, you are small," Lozano-Hemmer grants the ownership of space to the people who experience it every day, at least temporarily. In his latest "Relational Architecture" project, "Body Movies," staged in Rotterdam this spring, the massive shadows of passersby plastered the sides of the city's buildings. Humans were thus made equal to their monolithic urban surroundings.

In "Vectorial Elevation, Relational Architecture No. 4," which occurred in Mexico City in late 1999/early 2000, 18 light beams (requiring 126,000 watts of power) were controlled remotely via the Internet by some 800,000 people from 89 different countries. At once Rafael's collaborators and "virtual" spectators of the piece, their designs pierced both the night sky above Zocalo Square and the political/geographical boundaries that separated them – a digital subversion of what Jose Luis Cuervas called the "Cactus Curtain."

Also unlike one his earliest predecessors, Nazi architect Albert Speer, whose "Cathedral of Light" at the Nuremberg Rally in 1934 cast the Führer in a splendid glow of superhuman strength, Lozano-Hemmer works to debunk power. "I want to find heroism in weakness," he says. "I think weakness is flexibility."

David Alm

