



# performing cultures

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*Phenomenons*

Architecture and Urban Studies

## Relational Architecture: „Voz Alta“ (Loud Voice), Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

In this paper I explore the concept of Relational Architecture as an exemplification and expression of many elements related to the notion of architecture regarding contemporary art practices. Specifically I analyze how the artwork *Loud Voice (Voz Alta, 2008)* by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (a mexican-canadian artist) intervenes a public and historical place in Mexico City in order to produce critical expressions of inhabiting space. This work belongs to the series of 21 works the artist named “Relational Architecture”. *Loud Voice* is the 15th. In the words of Lozano-Hemmer:

“Voz Alta” (*Loud Voice*) is a memorial commissioned (by a museum of the National University of Mexico) for the 40th anniversary of the student massacre in Tlatelolco, which took place on October 2nd 1968 (just few days before the Olympics, and it is important to know that this massacre has not been recognized by the Mexican government). In the piece, participants speak freely into a megaphone placed on the “Plaza de las Tres Culturas” (where you can find the representative architecture of the pre-colonial era, the colonial times and modern Mexico), right where the massacre took place. As the megaphone amplifies the voice, a 10kW searchlight automatically “beams” the voice as a sequence of flashes: if the voice is silent the light is off and as it gets louder so does the light’s brightness. As the searchlight beam hits the top of the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, now Centro Cultural Tlatelolco (where the museum that commissioned the work is), it is relayed by three additional searchlights, one pointed to the north (Guadalupe Basilica), one to the southeast towards Zócalo Square and one to the southwest towards the Monument to the Revolution (so each light points to the most representative icons of the Nation). Depending on the weather, the searchlights could be seen from a 15Km radius, quietly transmitting the voice of the participants over Mexico City. Anyone around the city

could tune into 96.1FM Radio UNAM (the University's radio station) to listen in live to what the lights were saying"<sup>2</sup>.

Relational Architecture is more than a label for Lozano-Hemmer's works, it is a concept the artist created in order to conceptualize his own artistic interventions in public places. It regards an emotional engagement to spaces through architectural elements and the possibility to give new meanings to the places located in urban environments.

Lozano Hemmer defines Relational Architecture as the "technological actualization of buildings with alien memory" or "anti-monuments for public dissimulation"<sup>3</sup>. He distances himself from Nicholas Borriaud's concept of Relational Art, which is the most popular view for explaining certain kind of artworks in an intimate relation with their social context. Lozano-Hemmer thinks about his own artistic practice according to the specificity of the relations between the work, the space and the public, and goes beyond Borriaud's inaccurate conception regarding contemporary art, which includes anything with the same label (for example the Relational Art proposal does not distinguish the differences between, i.e. a Tirivanjika's food performance and a Gillik's installation). Lozano-Hemmer works on the specificity of the space (being political, moral or institutional) using technological devices (mainly light and sound). His concept of Relational Architecture is based on what he calls "dissimulation" instead of simulation, because he closely works on the urban environment and the personal re-signification and questioning of the current sense of actual buildings"<sup>4</sup>.

My aim here is to analyze how *Loud Voice*, being Relational Architecture, explores the implications the public has with their own past and the history of their urban environment, recalling collective memories. At the same time how this work gives us an insight on how contemporary artists can give meaning to their own practices exemplifying many properties related to Fine Arts. In order to do that I will begin to briefly explore the relation this work has with two important aspects for understanding the architectural experience: visual imagination and embodied cognition.

## The visual experience in Relational Architecture 15

*Loud Voice* is a piece of "Site-Specific" art that can be easily related to "Situationism". Although Lozano-Hemmer has claimed "I don't want to develop site-specific installations but rather focus on the new temporal relationships that emerge from the artificial situation, what I call 'relationship-specific' art"<sup>5</sup>, *Loud Voice* was thought in order to recall the specificity the student's massacre in "La Plaza de las Tres Culturas" has in the collective memory of the inhabit-

ants of Mexico City. In his analysis of site-specific art practices Miwon Kwon has noticed that many labels designating a certain specificity of artworks situated in public or urban environments, i.e. community or issue-specific public art, are inserted in an extended discursive field related to the specific context of the places where they are, so, as many others early site-specific art works (i.e. Richard Serra or Hans Haacke), they belong to the category of site-specific<sup>6</sup>, however they might be characterized by other subcategories. Therefore, *Loud Voice* can be considered as a site-specific work of Relational Architecture, since it focuses on a re-signification of historical buildings and with what Lozano-Hemmer characterizes as “alien memories”, “those that don’t belong to the site”<sup>7</sup>.

Relational Architecture focuses on the emotional engagement with space, such as the situationist practices of *Dérive* and *Détournement*. The visual aspect of this work, through the digital processing of voice into light is a virtual configuration of the architectural visual-spatial construction of a habitat. Let me explain this.

Roger Scruton argues that there are two important aspects regarding architectural experience: perception and a certain kind of imaginative perception. Perception *per se* is understood as an act of seeing, so it refers to the visual experience we have when we see a building. Meanwhile imaginative perception enables us to get “enjoyment of the appearance of a thing already known”<sup>8</sup> from the attribution of unity to the building. That means, when we see a building it is attributed unity to it when we unify the temporal dimension of our experience through imagination<sup>9</sup>.

Likewise, Edward Winters emphasizes the role of the imaginative experience concerning our appreciation of architecture<sup>10</sup>. He uses the concept of “seeing as” in order to explain it. He argues that when we “see” a building “as” we see it according to the purpose it serves. Looking at certain building “as” depends on the imaginative experience that contains descriptions of that which is absent to perception. That is the reason why Winters and Scruton highlight the function of visual imagination or imaginative perception in our experience of architecture.

There are many elements involved in our imaginative visual experience of buildings. I am interested on the role played by light. Notwithstanding that it has been underestimated in its function in our architectural experience, light affects our visual perception of the space. If we follow Scruton and Winters, who might agree that the essence of architecture is “the enclosure of space, or space as enclosed”<sup>11</sup>, it is important how light influences our image processing in this enclosed space. The visibility of the façade and interiors of buildings is possible because of architectural lighting. Architects conceive a building taking into consideration natural and artificial illumination because light allows us to distinguish colours and details but also perceive the extension of the space. Light

lets us perceive the exterior of a building, so we can experience its unity, and when we access to the inside light gives us a particular atmosphere that brings different emotional experiences of the space constrained by the structure of the building.

Relational Architecture 15 metaphorizes the visual aspect of the architectural experience that light makes possible. Although “the artwork” is in la “Plaza de las Tres Culturas”, it directs our attention to the lights pointing out at somewhere else. In order to get the meaning the public has to know not only what happened in that place (the student’s massacre in 1968) but also the importance of the city places where the searchlights are directed.

Edward Winters says that sometimes “buildings might call to mind other buildings”, however “they do not thereby have other buildings as their representational content”. On one hand, *Loud Voice* it is in relation to the historical importance of the buildings situated in Tlatelolco, where the massacre happened. On the other hand, it is related to the most important monuments and buildings for the national identity thanks to the searchlights. Nevertheless, light gives the participants the opportunity to imagine the atmosphere of a metaphorical enclosed space, limited to the buildings indicated by the searchlights. At the same time, it helps them to imagine the enclosed space of the city in relation to its own history.

These kinds of artworks let the public visually imagine certain spatial connections (three points in the city) and re-create the feeling of living in an enclosed place (the urban space of Mexico City constrained by the history of the massacre and the symbols of national identity). *Loud Voice* provides us a more extreme experience of space than architecture and traditional monuments; it is the experience situationists wanted us to have: that related to a conception of architecture as “the art of living”<sup>12</sup>. However, as other architectural buildings, “it provides us with accommodation; and in so providing it addressees our appreciation of the lives we live within its embrace”<sup>13</sup>.

*Loud Voice* also embeds moral values through the emotional experience the participants have speaking on the megaphone or listening to the radio. Winters argues that “architecture, conceived as a public art involves a conception of ourselves as agents in a moral world. Just how we conceive of our freedom and how we conceive of the relations that hold between us will place constraints upon the way that we organize and design the buildings in which those relations are embedded”<sup>14</sup>. And certainly many Lozano-Hemmer’s Relational Architecture artworks try to emphasize that moral dimension through the experience of a paradoxically expanded enclosed space.

Architecture can move us, is emotional grounded. The lights of *Loud Voice* constrain the visual field and invite us to participate, such as many buildings

we look at and invite us to enter, to experience the contained space within them. Therefore, as Scruton says regarding architecture, Relational Architecture gives us an experience of knowing and perceiving at the same time. And that I will try to argue in the next section.

### **Architectural Embodied Cognition in *Loud Voice***

Lozano-Hemmer artworks are in intimate relation to the sense of a building as a habitat. In the case of *Loud Voice* it does not only focus on sight (like Le Corbusier modern architecture). Through the process of transforming sound in light and the sound in radio frequencies this work makes it possible to ground an embodied experience of space. Let me explain what I mean by this embodied experience.

Mark Johnson has argued that our sensory motor experiences are the base of pre-reflective meaning, but also we recruit these experiences for abstract and metaphorical meanings<sup>15</sup>. For example, we can find meaning grounded in bodily perceptions and experiences in containment, verticality, balance, force and motion. Regarding architecture, Johnson considers that it “gets much of its meaning and significance from the ways it organises our bodily perception and experience”, so “we experience and understand buildings metaphorically as human bodies”<sup>16</sup>. At the same time he contends that architecture “is at one rooted in the bodily patterns of meaning that constitute our everyday experience and yet is also at the same time able to transform those structures and meanings via imaginative acts”<sup>17</sup>.

Architecture entails an embodied experience that gives sense to our habitat. We walk around buildings; we inhabit, work, and live in them. We can experience an enclosed space as long as we walk through it. Buildings have different meanings for us according to our embodied experience in them. And sometimes this experience is attached to our memories.

Embodied experience, memory and action in space are closely related. As Mark Johnson pointed out:

“We have to understand the power of architecture in the same way that we understand all forms of symbolic interaction, namely, as grounded in sedimented practices, traditions, and historical events, and yet as transforming the present situation in ways that open up possibilities for future experience. Architecture is a temporal process that bridges past, present, and future. It grows out of the long history of our embodied development and experiences, it changes present conditions through acts of creation, and it thereby shapes the possibilities for future interactions”<sup>18</sup>.

In the case of *Loud Voice* many testimonies were related to the experience of the survivors of the massacre and they tried to map their ways to hide or run away from the place. The location of the work helped people to cognitively process their memories in order to recreate a collective history of the massacre. Some of them came back to participate and some others, who still live close-by, had the opportunity to express their past experiences. They could process their own memories through putting themselves again in historical place intervened (with three buildings that contain the three major eras of Mexico's history) in order to let them have this experience. These testimonies showed the role embodied experiences had in spatial representations of Tlatelolco during the massacre. For example, a man who was in the theatre described his journey through streets and buildings in order to escape from the army during the shootings. These testimonies suggest that there might be certain support to the "evidence shown from spatial cognition/psychology (that) suggests that we form some kind of mental representation of real-world places that, rather than being a literal "map in the head," is as parse and highly efficient representation of the environment in which certain features such as direct paths between locations, the egocentric angles at which paths cross, and visually salient features along routes and at path intersections (landmarks) are prominent"<sup>19</sup>.

Although these testimonies might re-create our embodied experience in architecture as well as our memories tied to it, I want to try to answer the following question:

### **Is *Loud Voice* Architecture?**

According to Scruton, "we must find the description under which and object must be seen and appreciated if it is to be appreciated as architecture"<sup>20</sup>. Hence, is it possible to describe Relational Architecture artworks as architecture?

Scruton contends that the essence of architecture is to enclosure space and to give us a sense of place. *Loud Voice* successfully does it, as I tried to show. However, as he argues for something to be architecture it does not only have to be pleasing to look (enacting pleasurable sensations and pleasurable attention) but also it has to be functional. Even if, as Winters argues, "it remains true that while the fact that a building has utility we cannot be required to specify in detail that particular use a building must have"<sup>21</sup>, no Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Relational Architecture work have any functional use, so they cannot be seen as buildings.

However, Relational Architecture works make possible to recreate imaginatively a habitat in a public space. Specifically in the case of *Loud Voice*, the

work recalls critically the architectural function of modern monuments since it transforms the “intimidation” traditionally associated to the historical event into a more “intimate” space where people can reconstruct their past and future relation to the place.

Scruton and Winters agree that “architecture is the art which most naturally encapsulates what has been called “form of life”. Relational Architecture works are not literally architecture, but they might function, following Goodman, as a metaphorical exemplification that express certain architectural properties, those I tried to show: visual imagination and embodied experience.

Goodman argues that “exemplification is one of the major ways that architecture works mean”<sup>22</sup>. Relational Architecture obviously does not depict, but it exemplifies certain properties fundamental for defining what architecture is. *Loud Voice* metaphorizes what might mean for their citizens architecture and the buildings in “La Plaza de las Tres Culturas” and Mexico City monuments as well. At the same time it express an updated collective memory in the public domain. It expresses something outside itself; it is related, “relational” to other things. It connects the sense of architecture as an “enclosed space” with the world outside.

## Endnotes

1. This paper was developed with the support of the Research project “Art and community”, UAM-Lerma (PROMEP 53310018).
2. [http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/voz\\_alta.php](http://www.lozano-hemmer.com/voz_alta.php).
3. Jose Luis Barrios talks to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. 20th of April 2005. Teleconference at the Sala de Arte Público Siquieros (SAPS), Mexico City. Rebecca MacSween (Trans.). <http://turbulence.org/blog/2005/10/31/a-conversation-between/>.
4. In the words of Lozano-Hemmer the terms Relational Architecture and Subsculptures: They are more about arbitrary concepts. They are neologisms designed precisely to avoid being classified with other existing concepts. I first used the term “relational” in 1994 in describing my telepresence installation “The Trace”. I found the word in the neurological essays of Maturana and Varela, although I was also aware of pioneering artists like Lygia Clark and Helio Oiticia and their work with relational objects. As well, I was interested in the relational functions of database programs that wove multi-dimensional webs for connecting various fields, a valuable concept when applied to the word “architecture” that for so long has signified solidity and permanence. Lastly, it was a good word in counterpoint to the term “virtual”, which emphasizes the dematerialization of experience and asks us to create in simulacra. “Relational” emphasizes the dematerialization of the real environment and asks us to question the dissimulation. Today the term is already dated, partly because of the

popularization of the term “relational aesthetics” by Nicolas Bourriaud, which by the way has little to do with my work and was published a number of years after I used the term. For the sake of coherence with my earlier work, I will probably continue to make Relational Architecture pieces maintaining the two grotesque definitions that I gave to the field: “technological actualizations of urban environments with alien memory” and the newer “anti-monuments for public dissimulation”. Jose Luis Barrios talks to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. 20th of April 2005. Teleconference at the Sala de Arte Público Siquieros (SAPS), Mexico City. Rebecca MacSween (Trans.). <http://turbulence.org/blog/2005/10/31/a-conversation-between/>.

5. Ibid.
6. “The slide from site-specific to issue-specific in public art can be seen as yet another example of the ways in which the concept of the site has moved away from one of concrete physical location, as I argued in chapter 1. The invocation of the community-specific and the audience-specific, in which the site is displaced by a group of people assumed to share some sense of common/communal identity based on (experiences of) ethnicity, gender, geographical proximity, political affiliation, religious beliefs, social and economic classes, etc., can be described as an extension of the discursive virtualization of the site, at least to the extent that identity itself is constructed within a complex discursive field”. Kwon Miwon, *One place after another. Site-specific art and locational identity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 112.
7. Barrios & Lozano-Hemmer, op. cit.
8. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*, London: Methuen, 1979, p. 95.
9. “Once we abstract form day-today perception and enter the world of imagination, our experience ceases to obey normal theoretical and practical structures. It is neither an instrument of knowledge, nor a premise to action. Whatever unity the experience achieves will depend upon a corresponding unity imposed upon its object... Imaginative experience borrows its unity from the unity attributed to its object. So long as it is possible to attend to the object under a unified conception, so will the experience which expresses that conception retain its integrity... The unity depends upon bringing both experiences under a single conception, and upon accommodating experience to conception, as one accommodates experience to conception in seeing a group of lines as a pattern or a face”. Ibid., p. 102.
10. Edward Winters, *Aesthetics and Architecture*, London: Continuum, 2007.
11. Scruton, op. cit. p. 43.
12. Winters, op. cit., p. 101.
13. Ibid., p. 143.
14. Ibid., p. 101.
15. Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*, USA: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
16. Mark Johnson, *Architecture and the Embodied Mind*, OASE 58, 2002, p. 84.
17. Ibid. p. 88.
18. Ibid. p. 92.

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19. Golledge, 1999; Siegel & White, 1975, quoted in Alasdair Turner and Ruth Conroy Dalton, "Four Applications of Embodied Cognition", *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 2012, pp. 786–796.
20. Scruton, *op. cit.* p. 70.
21. Winters, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
22. Nelson Goodman, "How Buildings Mean", *Critical Inquiry*, 11.