FLASH IN JAPAN
BRIAN MASSUMI ON RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER’S AMODAL SUSPENSION

"A MESSAGE FOR YOU is floating in the sky of Yamaguchi." Beginning on November 1—in conjunction with the opening of the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media, Japan—thousands of people around the world will receive this alert by cell phone or e-mail, kicking off Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s installation Amodal Suspension (Relational Architecture III), which runs through November 24. The message will in fact be waiting for them, suspended in the night sky over this city in southern Japan—waiting and flashing, like the seductively illegible signals that Japan’s most popular winged insect, the lightning bug, uses to find mates for coupling. Yamaqachi is, after all, the self-declared fiery capital of the country and destination for a major yearly festival to the bug. At first sight, the light signals that Amodal Suspension is to send pulsing into the sky will be just as illegible as the insect variety, but many others of magnitude more visible. Standing in for the orthoptera abdomen will be an array of the world’s most powerful robotic searchlights, perched upon a pedestal atop custom-built steel towers ringing the site of the new Yamaguchi Center, which was designed by Arata Isozaki.

In Amodal Suspension, people may send short text messages to each other using a cell phone or Web browser connected to www.amodal.net. But rather than being sent directly to their intended recipients, the messages are encoded as unique sequences of flashes and “deposited” in the sky, awaiting collection. A searchlight designated by the sender will begin to beam the message and rotate. Then a random second searchlight will pick up the code, and the two beams will intersect, fleeting in unison. No sooner will they connect, however, than the first beam will extinguish. A third random searchlight will then take up the message, intersecting with the second. The messages will be relayed in this fashion from one pair of searchlights to another, in a dance of lights. This technique, known as asexual rays, is the only coupling that effectively takes place. A number of processes have been designed into the installation to come between the sender and the receiver of the message. These complicate the bipolar transmission usually considered to lie at the heart of human communication to such a degree that one is forced to say either that what is being made visible here is not (or not only) human communication or that human communication is not definable by the dual subjective structure that is usually assumed to characterize it.

AMODAL SUSPENSION MAKES VISIBLE THE RE-ARISING OR REEMERGENCE OF SPECIFICALLY HUMAN COMMUNICATION, IN ITS FIRST FLUSH, OR FLASH, SEEN FOR WHAT IT IS: A NONLINEAR CROWD PHENOMENON.

The first complication is that the message appears in an entirely different mode than its encoding code. It is present in a purely visible way, seen before it can be read, and unable to be read as it is seen. This is because the flashing in the sky is a translation of the digital input into an analog signal that preserves only select characteristics of the digitally encoded linguistic meaning. To each letter in the message corresponds a change in the intensity of the beam. Letter by letter, different light intensities are sent without interruption, in a continuity of variation. There is a moment of darkness between words, but this interval is no way comparable to the off state of the digital code. It is more a punctuation between the continuities of variation on either side than merely one half of the on/off binary. The interval’s offness makes a threesome: two series of intensities, with itself between. This “thirdness” (to speak like founding semiotician C.S. Peirce) is the basic articulation of the signal. But there’s a crowd. Each of the variations punctuated by the off-state is multiple, consisting of a population of intensities. This complexity translates as a pulsation, a result very different from the strobe effect ordinarily used to transmit codes visually. Most if not all of the messages will consist of more than two words. Coming irregularly in the midst of a series of changes in intensity, the moment of darkness will meld into the continuing pulsing, its three-ness passing into the multiplicity it parses. Rather than an offstate that is the opposite of an on-state, it will come across as the low note on the same scale (brightness). In other words, the compositional principles of the signal, as experienced, is more a continuous modulation of a single dimension of perception than an encoding of separate bits of data or a sequencing of units of meaning. Modulation is the very definition of the analog signal—a continuous variation in amplitude and time (i.e., a smoothly varying value).

What value is being analogically varied here? The changes in intensity are based on the frequency with which the corresponding letter occurs in the language of the message. The higher the frequency, the brighter the pulse. Letter frequency is a socially-historical variable. It materializes in statistical form the particularities of a culturally specific linguistic evolution. In Amodal Suspension, this cultural-frequency variable pulses into view as a visual rhythm. The encoding of letter frequency into the beam attaches it genetically to culture-specific rhythms of speech. But the encoding is not visually decodable by the viewer, any more than the meaning of the message can be seen in the pulse and flutter. What comes across

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The message cannot be retransmitted to a third party.

The communicational system, found in nature, is built to do that in human language. Human communication is defined by the linguistic "thirdness," by its capacity not for linear transmission but for indirectness. This complicates things: With that third party waiting down the line comes the possibility of someone jumping into the line and intercepting the message. Indirect relay and message passing, or tricking, is the true ground of human communication. With indirect relay inevitably comes noise and the accompanying distortion of message content. A full model than sender-coded message—receiver would be a combination of the games of "telephone" and musical chairs.

Of course, "third" parties never come in ones. Where there's one third, there's bound to be another down the noisy line. There's a crowd again. But this time the triadic multiplicity separates human language back out, returning it to its proper mode: Lozano-Hemmer's installation also makes visible the re-arising or re-emergence of specifically human communication, its first flush, or flash, seen for what it is: a nonlinear crowd phenomenon. The rising community of reparable biases is Lozano-Hemmer's visual analogue of what he calls the chaotic social soup of many-party "thirdness": a literal flash mob.

The relational architecture of the installation perforce the community ground of human communication, even as it connects communication to its outside. This is what the installation complicately interjects between the first and second parties of the simple dual-subjective model of communication: there's a shared relationality and the outside force that comes with language but is not it (is instead its "extra" effect).

Lozano-Hemmer's work requires us to reassess our notions of the analog and the digital, of language and code, of meaning and force, human and nonhuman communication. But it does so not by comment, critiquing, or sending a message itself. It does it aesthetically, by which I do mean "beautifully" (although his installations always are that, too). Rather, I mean "aesthetic" in something closer to the eponymous meaning: as in "aesthetics," "making sense." The relational architecture he has pioneered is the amodal digital art of making sense what isn't (forces, community, relational emergents) in participatory analog splendor: like insect, like art.

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