Body Movies: The City as Interface

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Chapter Four

**Body Movies:**
The City as Interface

Martijn de Waal

The city would not exist as a modern urban society without the urban public domain. This is the central claim of a large number of theories of urban culture. After all, urban life is defined by the fact that we are forced to share the city with a multitude of strangers from disparate backgrounds and with diverse identities and interests. For this reason it is of great importance that there are public spaces where we encounter these “others”, are confronted by them and must relate to them. In each of these theories, the urban public domain in which people negotiate their everyday practice, cultural identity and political ideals has a physical character: it takes place on the agora, the boulevard, the street or in the coffee house.

However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century digital and mobile media are beginning to play an ever-greater role in the spatial experience of urban life and this has consequences for the manner in which the urban public domain functions. Indeed, I would venture that it is now questionable whether the concept of the urban public domain is still meaningful now that the interfaces of digital media are beginning to play a large role in the ways in which people relate to each other in cities. It is my contention that, partly for this reason, the term interface will have to play a central role in the theory of urban culture. The interactive video installation *Body Movies – Relational Architecture 6* by the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer makes clear how this works.

*Body Movies – Relational Architecture 6* was shown in Rotterdam in September 2001 as part of the city’s celebrations as Cultural Capital of Europe. The work by the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer consisted of a nocturnal shadow play generated by passers-by on the immense side wall of the Pathé cinema complex on the Schouwburgplein (see figures 12 and 13). In recent years *Body Movies* has come to be seen as a canonical project within the critical discourse around digital and interactive media. In this contribution I intend to
demonstrate, partially on the basis of some of these commentaries, how *Body Movies* has made an important contribution to the debate about the urban public domain. In particular, the work questions the impact of digital and multimedia technologies on urban culture.

Three points are crucial in this respect. Firstly, through digital projections *Body Movies* provides the built environment with an interactive media layer, thus altering the experience and meaning of the location. In this way *Body Movies* feeds into discussions about the “hybridization” of urban life: the experience of the city is determined not only by the physical space but also by “urban screens” and mobile media technologies.

The second point builds upon the first. If this media layer indeed plays an important role in the experience of the city, then the interface design of this media layer must also play an important role. What role does the interface play in social interactions among urban populations? Does an interface work primarily as a filter, in which the media layer fits the individual’s personal preferences? Or does the interface stimulate chance encounters between strangers? In *Body Movies* Lozano-Hemmer developed a specific notion of interactivity, which can be of importance in the design of software interventions in urban life.

This leads us to the third point. *Body Movies* offers a clue for a new way of looking at the urban public domain. As René Boomkens has shown elsewhere in this volume, the urban public domain has hitherto primarily been described in spatial terms. The discussion always centres on the urban spaces in which various social processes take place. Using *Body Movies* as an example, I would like to shift the focus of the discussion. Due to the hybridization of urban life, interfaces take on a crucial role. In order to understand urban culture fully, we should shift our focus away from the spatial forms of the urban public domain towards how the city as a whole functions as an “interface”. I shall elaborate these three points further below. But before doing so, it is important to explain the precise workings of *Body Movies*.

**Body Movies – the installation**

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer was inspired to make *Body Movies* by the seventeenth-century engraving *The Shadow Dance* by Samuel van Hoogstraten, which depicts actors performing a shadow play by standing in front of a light source placed close to the ground. The closer they stand to the light source, the larger and more demonic their shadows appear on the backdrop. With *Body Movies* Lozano-Hemmer wished to provoke a similar shadow dance with twentieth-century means and in which the audience takes on a performative role: the work of art takes form only when the public is seduced into participating in the shadow dance.
Three centuries after Samuel van Hoogstraten’s time the light source consists of two bright xenon lamps placed at ground level on the Schouwburgplein, projecting a powerful beam onto the wall of the Pathé cinema complex. Simultaneously, photographs of people walking in the streets of Rotterdam are projected from a high platform. However, the light from the xenon lamps is so bright that the projected photographs remain invisible until someone walks in front of the lamps, revealing part of the image in his or her shadow. When passers-by realize that they are able to “reveal” the photographic images with their shadows, some of them usually begin to experiment with this effect.

Lozano-Hemmer has added yet another playful interactive element to the installation. If the shadows of the passers-by on the Schouwburgplein precisely match the outlines of the people in the projected photograph, a new image is projected. A camera with image-recognition software constantly analyzes the shadow play and triggers a new projection when certain conditions are met. In this way passers-by are encouraged to work together to adopt positions in front of the xenon lamps that correspond to the composition on the cinema’s façade. In Rotterdam in 2001 this produced a “frequently comic and sometimes moving spectacle”, according to the *Algemeen Dagblad*: “Shadows of unsuspecting passers-by were affectionately embraced or mercilessly trampled underfoot by enormous giants. These were in fact small children who, coming close to the light, for a moment imagined themselves to be very big and powerful.”

“Urban screen”, “hybrid spaces” and the urban experience

*Body Movies* lays an interactive media layer over the Schouwburgplein, which passers-by can have an effect upon, triggering a new photograph depending on the position they adopt. The installation turns the Schouwburgplein into a “hybrid space”. This term was introduced by De Souza e Silva to indicate that urban life is no longer purely dictated by the physical environment, but that media layers and digital spaces now also play a part. She defines “hybrid space” as, “a conceptual space created by the merging of borders between physical and digital spaces”. Of importance in this respect is that the two layers – physical and virtual/digital – are actually no longer distinguishable: they flow into each other and are, in combination, responsible for the ways in which people experience a specific urban site.

*Body Movies* is often connected with the emergence of the so-called “urban screens”, an umbrella term for large, sometimes interactive billboards in the public realm. In one sense, “urban screens” fit within a long tradition of inscriptions and images on buildings from sculptures on temples and frescos and stained-glass windows in cathedrals to the flickering neon and LED advertisements of Tokyo’s Shibuya district or New York’s Times Square. What is new,
however, is that the content of this media layer has become flexible. Frescos and stained-glass windows have been part of the buildings in question for centuries but the content of a digital screen or light installation is largely distinct from its physical support. And in some cases this media layer may be influenced by those who use or pass by the location.

Precisely what the rise of “urban screens” means for the experience of the urban public domain depends, of course, on the application of the screen. There are “urban screens” around which crowds form, for example, to watch a concert, political event or football match. But other “urban screens” are related to the commercialization of the public realm: many of these billboards are used primarily for advertising and address the public as consumers. The newest generation of screens can even adapt the message to the audience. Cameras and a facial recognition system analyze the age and gender of passers-by and show a commercial tailored to their profile. In this way digital media are enlisted to add a media layer which attunes the environment – in marketing terms – to its users. And so the hybrid urban experience is used primarily to serve marketing and consumption.

Lozano-Hemmer employs projects such as Body Movies precisely to expose this encroaching commercialization of the public realm. He wishes to offer an alternative to the negative aspects of what René Boomkens has referred to elsewhere in this volume as denationalization and delocalization. Boomkens uses these terms to refer respectively to the emergence of global popular and commercial culture, and (often in tandem with the former) the emergence of sites whose architecture and function render them indistinguishable from similar sites elsewhere in the world, such as Starbucks and McDonald’s or the design of shopping malls and airports. Such phenomena threaten to produce urban environments that are entirely devoted to consumerism and which offer few opportunities for the creation of a local identity.

This local identity is undermined, for example, by the onslaught of billboards promoting international brands. These images are often part of global advertising campaigns and thus partially strip the city of its local identity, according to Lozano-Hemmer. “Cities are saturated with images and messages but they rarely show diversity and do not relate on an intimate level with the public”, he claims. They evoke feelings of distance, euphoria, obedience and awe. But few of a city’s inhabitants recognize themselves in these images that dominate the cityscape because, Lozano-Hemmer believes, commercial billboards insert a transnational dimension in an entirely one-sided way. They address a homogeneous and idealized international market and as such their representations are without nuance. Of course, the shady side of these transnational references are kept out of the picture, for example, that the fashionable trainers worn by a particular celebrity are made in poor working conditions in a factory in East Asia.
This sense of the loss of a local identity is amplified by the fact that the city’s architecture has also broken free from the local culture. Every city has the same office buildings and chain stores and also has – precisely out of fear of loss of identity to a globalized architectural style – a number of historical buildings that may not be altered. These are iconic museum pieces that safeguard a historical identity, but this heritage approach stands in the way of an appropriation of such buildings that is part of the contemporary experience.

With Body Movies Lozano-Hemmer wishes to combat these two interrelated tendencies. His aim is to misuse “the technology of spectacle” in order to awaken a sense of intimacy and engagement, for example, by temporarily giving buildings a local significance through his interactive installations:

An important aspect of my work ... is to produce a performative context where default buildings may take on temporary specificity and where vampire buildings’ [the term he uses for specific historical monuments] role of established prevailing identification may decline.9

An important source of inspiration in this respect is the ideas of the situationists. Like this group of artists around Guy Debord in the 1950s and 1960s, Lozano-Hemmer attempts to get people to look at themselves and the city around them in a new way. His aim is thus to “liberate” them or, in any case, to offer them an alternative to the disciplining mechanisms of consumer society, to pry passers-by away momentarily from their everyday routine and to invite them to make their own “readings and subtitles” of the city.10 Lozano-Hemmer is particularly enamoured with the situationist practice of the “virtual appointment”, in which a person was instructed to be at a particular location at a specified time, where they would encounter someone with a similar task. This idea could intensify the way in which the participants experience their surroundings:

Every person walking by might be about to step into your life. The slightest of gestures amplifies into an emergent sign of recognition. The space around is no longer a neutral frame. It is charged with anticipated gazes leading to potential approaches.11

Lozano-Hemmer believes that urban art interventions should have a similar character. “To exceed the expected” is his motto, a goal inspired by the situationist practices of the dérive and the detournement.12 Body Movies is just such an example of a project that shows how the deployment of digital media can create opportunities to invest the urban public domain with new meanings. Instead of advertising campaigns featuring larger-than-life depictions of international stars and sports heroes, Body Movies consists of a collection of images of “ordinary”
people, photographed during their everyday urban routines or simply strolling in
the city. By adding an extra layer with the help of interactive projections, the
physical reality is given a local context and identity that is normally denied by
the location’s function and design.

**Interface design and social relations**

In this respect Lozano-Hemmer is concerned not only with the content of his
projections, but also with the social interaction his project elicits. This occurs,
for example, through the playful element in *Body Movies* that encourages people
to work together temporarily to make the system switch to the next image. This
leads us to a second aspect of the manner in which the project intervenes in the
urban public domain: the role of the media interface in the encouragement or
avoidance of various social relations.

The remarkable thing about *Body Movies* is, writes Scott McQuire, that the
installation attracts a temporary audience of strangers who briefly engage in a
playful experience with each other and who discover that they can influence the
ambience by performing a collective choreography. This places Lozano-Hem-
mer’s work in the context of the influential French curator and art critic Nicholas
Bourriaud’s concept of “relational aesthetics”, in which the aim of the work of
art is not an artistic expression for its own sake, but to bring about new social
relationships.

This spontaneous choreography is fostered in part by Lozano-Hemmer’s spe-
cific approach to interactivity. Usually an interactive system in the public realm is
designed so that only one interaction is possible at one time: something or some-
one provides some form of input, upon which the installation produces an out-
come. In this case there are two possibilities: either members of the public use the
installation one at a time (“taking turns”), in which they each influence the
installation in their own way, or the system utilizes a mechanism to gauge the
average user and produces a result on this basis (“taking averages”). Lozano-
Hemmer finds both these options unsatisfactory. For him it is important that
numerous people can participate in *Body Movies* simultaneously and that their
mutual interaction plays a role in the total result. Each participant may take part
in his or her own discrete way without that interaction evaporating into a demo-
cratic average; simultaneously all sorts of collective patterns emerge.

For this reason Lozano-Hemmer prefers to speak of “relational architecture”
rather than interactivity, a term that is now so widely applied as to be rendered
virtually meaningless. Too often it is used in the reactive sense, that is, the user
pushes a button and something happens according to a predetermined pattern.
The term “relational” is intended to express the multiplicity of relationships that
his work can generate: “‘Relational’ has a more horizontal quality; it’s more col-
lective. Events happen in fields of activity that may have resonances in several places in the network.”

He believes that a designer of interactive systems must not work in an excessively top-down fashion. The aim is not to anticipate all possible outcomes in advance and thus to conceive a fixed and manageable pattern. An interactive system should be designed with a certain degree of openness so that users can appropriate it in ways not anticipated by the artist.

Several critics have made a connection between the way in which Lozano-Hemmer attempts to provoke fleeting social relationships and the theories about the urban public domain of writers such as Richard Sennett and Jane Jacobs. As early as the 1960s, in her influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs pointed to the importance of everyday, apparently trivial and short-lived interactions in the public domain. As trivial as they may be, they are indispensable for building mutual trust among citizens.

Sennett, on the other hand, sketches a development in which the urban public domain is increasingly dominated by non-communication: “There grew up the notion that strangers had no right to speak to each other, that each man possessed as a public right an invisible shield, a right to be left alone.” Sennett sees the beginning of this development in Paris in the 1860s, with the installation of the café terraces on the French capital’s newly laid-out boulevards. The public is no longer the active public that populated the coffee houses of the seventeenth century, but a passive public of loners lost in their own thoughts. At best, they allow their gaze to glide across the spectacle of the boulevard like a flâneur, again primarily as a passive public. “That is how the flâneur is to be appreciated”, writes Sennett, “he is to be watched, not spoken to.” In the twentieth century Sennett even sees a trend in which citizens increasingly retreat to geographical zones where they feel at ease and, above all, where they encounter similar people.

Anthropological research into how urban populations use digital media seems to suggest that this trend continues at the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example, the Norwegian researcher Rich Ling has shown that people use mobile phones in various urban situations primarily to maintain contact with people in their own social network. These contacts are, he argues, at the expense of interaction with strangers who, although physically present, may be ignored. Many of the commercial initiatives in the hybrid city are also based on personalization. For example, there are interfaces available for mobile phones that guide people to places that fit their personal profile or where they will mainly encounter their “own kind”. This interface thus functions as a filter in order to avoid contact with strangers.

Can a hybrid interface such as that of *Body Movies* counteract this development? Can such an intervention encourage people to interact with each other, no matter how briefly? Can interaction design seduce citizens into breaking the
silence? Sennett’s work, McQuire argues, demonstrates that his ideal of urban culture is not a natural state, but is conditioned. An installation such as Body Movies can play a role in this respect:

Through mutual participation, people discover they are able to intervene – albeit ephemerally – in the look and feel of central city public space. In short, they are platforms encouraging creative public behaviour, enabling the city to become an experimental public space.23

Perhaps this is asking too much of artists. Nevertheless, the importance of interventions such as Lozano-Hemmer’s resides, at least in part, in this notion. They show that an alternative interface design is possible which stimulates brief encounters as part of everyday urban life.

The city as interface

This brings us to the final point. Body Movies invites us to look at the urban public domain in a new way. With the hybridization of the urban public domain, all kinds of interfaces play a mediating role in the manner in which social relations are given spatial form. In the debate about the urban public domain, it therefore seems meaningful to shift attention to the role of interfaces, or even to view the city itself entirely as an interface.

That is not an entirely new idea. Manuel Castells has already compared the function of the urban public domain with that of an interface. According to Castells, everyday urban life largely revolves around adapting individual identities to collective ones, the present to the past, and the concerns of various urban collectives to each other. For Castells the city is a material reflection of social representations, and so forms a site where individuals can relate to these social representations:

Cities have always been communication systems, based on the interface between individual and communal identities and shared social representations. It is their ability to organize this interface materially in forms, in rhythms, in collective experience and communicable perception that makes cities producers of sociability, and integrators of otherwise destructive creativity.24

However, debates about the urban public domain have until now emphasized the spatial aspects of these social processes. Often the central question is whether there are still sufficient urban spaces where such exchanges can take place. Are they not under pressure from, for example, the car, the television and the emergence of shopping centres and gated communities?
The problem with this view is not that this criticism is unjust: indeed and urban society cannot exist without moments of exchange, conflict and adaptation. But with the use of the term “interface” I wish to shift the emphasis from the site of interfacing to the process itself. This avoids, for example, that we must imagine the demise of the urban public domain and it offers the possibility of exploring whether these social processes may surface in new ways and in unexpected domains.

The second reason I choose to approach the city as an interface is that interfaces are literally beginning to play an important role in urban life. People increasingly experience the city around them via the virtual environment of the screens of their laptops and mobile phones. Encounters, conflicts and the process of adapting (or “interfacing”) now occur not only spatially but are also mediated by the interfaces of social networking sites, blogs and location-based services.

Third, and last, the term “interface” directs our attention to the process of mediation that takes place via the interface. The software that runs on a mobile telephone is not a neutral environment. The way in which it is programmed – the restrictions and possibilities that it offers – contribute to defining the way in which we experience our environment. The term “interface” contains a notion of what Bruno Latour calls a “mediator”: “‘mediators’ transform, translate, distort and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry”.25 The use of the term “interface” indicates that a process of adaptation takes place in which the medium itself partially determines the entity in which this may be achieved. It is not a neutral environment, but contributes to the manner in which this occurs. Some of these interfaces will probably hinder exchange and confrontation. But a project such as Body Movies demonstrates that alternatives are also possible.

Notes

2. I elaborate this argument further in my doctoral dissertation: De Stad als interface. Hoe het mobiele internet de stad verandert (The City as Interface: How the Mobile Internet Changes the City), University of Groningen, 2011.
5. See, for example, Scott McQuire, “The Politics of Public Space in the Media City”, First Mon-


8. The inspiration is Paul Virilio’s term “effraction” – the city’s “overexposure” to images in the capitalist system. Brian Massumi and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, “Urban Appointments: A Possible Rendezvous with the City”, in Making Art of Databases, ed. Lev Manovich (Rotterdam: V2_ publishing, 2003).


13. McQuire, “The Politics of Public Space in the Media City”.


15. Adriaansens and Brouwer, “Alien Relationships from Public Space”.


23. Scott McQuire, “Mobility, Cosmopolitanism and Public Space in the Media City”, in Urban Screens Reader, ed. Scott McQuire, Meredith Martin and Sabine Niederer (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2009), 59.
