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Interactive art that's larger than life

By Joyce Hor-Chung Lau

HONG KONG

Patra Li, 17, was out on the city's neon-ringed boardwalk at 10:30 last Friday night, waving her arms in front of a large, illuminated cube. Her 4-year-old brother danced in front of her, and the two watched as they cast 30-meter-high shadows onto the outer walls of the Hong Kong Museum of Art.

Their silhouettes mingled with those of other passersby. And these, in turn, were superimposed onto flashing images of people in Hong Kong taken by eight local photographers. The spectacle of light and shadow — made possible by high-powered projectors and floodlights — lit up the harbor-side.

"It's very creative," Patra said of the large-scale installation. "Hopefully, events like this will help raise the standard of Hong Kong's cultural scene."

Patra's father, Alex, said that it was good to have art on the outside of the museum, as well as on its inside. "Things like the arts festival or the museum can be seen as a bit upper class," he said. "This is for the general public. It's a good thing here, because it can be hard to get the whole family to go to an art event together."

The Li family, along with many others, were participating in "Body Movies," a work by the Mexico-born artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who is best known for building what he calls "anti-

monuments": enormous, high-tech, interactive works that take over public spaces, sometimes for weeks at a time.

"A lot of my work is not so much about people communicating with machines, as through machines," he said in a video conference. (It was only fitting that Lozano-Hemmer would show up for his interview on a projection screen, through a video feed from his home in Montreal, via a MacBook Pro operated by a cigarette-puffing assistant.)

He explained that most people relate to technology in a solitary way — for example, working on a computer in a cubicle — and that he wanted his art to challenge that.

"I want to use technology to create something intimate," he said. "In this work, people are having an instant relationship with an image. The people are taking over, amplifying their personalities. 'Body Movies' is a new way of connecting hundreds of people."

Videos of past "Body Movies" exhibitions in Europe — in Duisburg, Germany; Linz, Austria; Liverpool; Lisbon; and Rotterdam — show pedestrians interacting with a playfulness rarely seen in museums or galleries. In Rotterdam, one girl skipped away from the floodlights toward



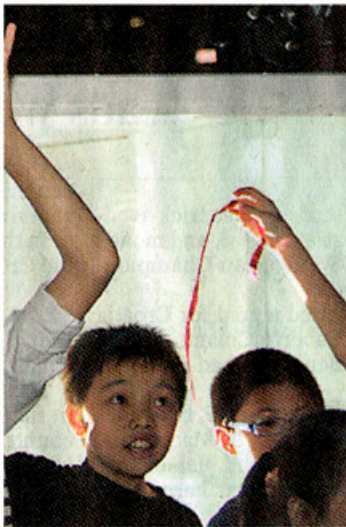


Photographs courtesy of the Hong Kong Arts Centre

the screen, watching her shadow get smaller and smaller. Another woman created a giant shadow by standing right next to the projector, and then proceeded to kick her boyfriend's much smaller shadow. One spiky-haired teenager cast his shadow in front of an image of an elderly woman carrying groceries, creating a sort of hybrid image that was both male and female, young and old.

"We also had a man in a wheelchair rolling over and crushing everyone, and deriving a lot of pleasure from that," the artist said. "We need a little perversity for people to feel they can re-

"Body Movies" by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, above right, incites people to interact with a playfulness rarely seen in museums. His installations superimpose shadows of passersby over photos of local people (in Linz, Austria, far left, and Hong Kong, above and left).



late."

In his art, Lozano-Hemmer tends to refrain from being didactic or delving into sociology. Still, "Body Movies" has an undeniably democratic feel, and its beauty is that it changes each time it is shown in a different country, in a different culture, with different people.

"We traveled to five cities in Europe, and each has had a different flavor, and it challenges stereotypes," he said. "There's a stereotype that Latin people are always touching each other. But in Madrid, people were like 'That's your shadow. Don't

touch my shadow.' In England, I thought it would all be about propriety and class, but people were taking off their clothes and there was this crazy party atmosphere."

To prepare for the work's first Asian appearance, Lozano-Hemmer flew to Hong Kong in June to work closely with the Hong Kong Arts Center, meet local photographers, hold workshops and start doing research.

He directed local photographers to capture the day-to-day, and they came back with myriad, Hong Kong images: crowds in the subway sys-

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A slide show from "Body Movies" exhibits in Europe and Hong Kong.

tem, uniformed police officers, a child dressed in a superhero costume, an elderly Chinese woman carrying her groceries from the covered market.

Lozano-Hemmer is something of a darling in the contemporary art world, with works in the collection of New York's Museum of Modern Art and shows in dozens of countries. He is at work on five interactive installations for the 2007 Venice Biennale, but is largely focused on touring "Body Movies" around the world.

Each time it is shown, hundreds of photos are kept on file, and some of the old are added to the new. So there will be a few Spaniards and Britons projected onto the Hong Kong museum's walls before the exhibition ends Sunday. And when the installation moves to the Sydney Opera House in January 2008, Hong Kong images will be added to that.

He goes back to the idea of creating the anti-monument — something that is fluid, unlike a statue or fountain. "Monuments usually remember history or wars. I'm more interested in the minor histories of people — the history of some old lady interacting with some punk rock kid."

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