Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
HAUNCH OF VENISON

The experience of the “nexus between corporeality, representation and technology” promised by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s recent show began well before visitors entered the galleries in which the Mexican-born, Canada-based artist’s work was installed. In fact it started in earnest about two hundred feet below them, in the brass and marble lobby of the midtown Manhattan office building whose penthouse Haunch of Venison comfortably, if rather anomalously, inhabits.

Here on the outskirts of Rockefeller Center, as in most big-city skyscrapers these days, one trades the nominal physical autonomy of the public sphere for a private environment marked by unapologetically present technologies of surveillance and control. Everyone by now knows the typical routine—after identity is registered and transferred to a bar-coded badge, an elevator ride further crystallizes our role in the modern panopticon: at once watched (by the CCTV cameras secreted amid the veneer and mirrors) and watcher (here of little wall-mounted video screens looping a stuflifying mix—the “Captivate Network”—of business news, weather forecasts, and advertisements). As it was, this specific sociospatial context had intriguing consonances with, and lent unexpected resonances to, Lozano-Hemmer’s artistic meditations on the symbiosis between technology and the individual.

Lozano-Hemmer is an accomplished engineer of sophisticated devices—often using light and sound—that emphasize, and attempt to bridge, the distinctions between humans and our technologies. This impulse lies at the core of one of his most formally spectacular works, used here as a lavish introduction to the show in the middle of the gallery’s towering atrium: Pulse Spiral, 2008, a twenty-foot-long tapered chandelier suspended from the ceiling like an inverted Christmas tree whose three hundred incandescent lightbulbs flash in time with the heartbeat of visitors who grasp a pair of sensor handles beneath it, bathing the foyer in an intermittent cascade of light.

The desire to translate human activity (whether conscious or strictly physiological) into modes of machine language has been a consistent interest for Lozano-Hemmer over the past several years—New York’s Madison Square Park hosted a similarly cardiac-impelled light installation, Pulse Park, in 2008. Virtually every work in this exhibition responded in one way or another to the viewer’s stimulus—in Less Than Three: EL Wire Small Version, 2008, a network of orange electroluminescent wires glows when visitors speak into an intercom, while Reference Flow, 2009, uses motion sensors to direct a squad of exit signs to always point toward the viewer’s left. The engaging flat-screen work Company of Colors, Shadow Box 9, 2009, meanwhile, reinterprets live images of viewers as an array of little rectangular palette chips; it informed at least one of them that his skin tone was an unfortunate combination of caput mortuum (literally “dead head”) and bister (a brownish-gray pigment traditionally made from soot).

The show was replete with such opportunities to “interact”—visitors were invited to approach colossal plasma screens to make arrays of video couples kiss in Make Out, Plasma Version, 2009, or tempted to stomp near Seismoscope 1, 2009, an altered seismometer that translates the vibrational data it compiles into loose sketches of the sixteenth-century Portuguese skeptic philosopher Francisco Sanches. Curiously, however, as one moved through the show, past huge windows looking out over a midtown landscape throbbing with the ubiquitous evidence of the modern world’s endemic human/technological interfaces, even the most complex and ambitious of Lozano-Hemmer’s gallery-based gestures began to seem trivial partners for such activity. Insufficiently acute aestheticizations of the intricate nexus they propose to explore, lacking either the real utility or the sense of criticality that might give them meaning beyond their undeniably charming construction, these works ultimately read like a series of high-toned science fair projects wrought by an unusually handy philosophy student—machines that, as the old joke has it, may work in practice, but not in theory.

—Jeffrey Kastner