The Color of Sound
*Rafael Lozano-Hemmer turns shadows, voices and heartbeats into interactive art*

By KELLY CROW

For nearly two decades, artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has planted motion detectors, searchlights and surveillance equipment in public plazas and parks around the world. Each time, he invites the public to activate his gadgetry with their shadows, heartbeats or some other form of interaction.

This fall, the Montreal-based artist plans to turn people's voices into colors. On Sept. 16, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York will unveil "Levels of Nothingness," his interactive installation that will allow people to speak into a microphone connected to a computer that can match their voices' traits, such as pitch and tone, to certain colors. A network of roving spotlights around the museum's theater will instantly send the corresponding hues shooting around the room like at a rock concert. Actress Isabella Rossellini has already signed up to speak first, according to her spokeswoman.

Mr. Lozano-Hemmer, 41, represented Mexico in the Venice Biennial two years ago, and his collectors include New York real-estate magnate Jerry Speyer, Mexican beverage king Eugenio López Alonso and Miami entrepreneur Ella Cisneros. The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London also own his work, which can range in price from $90,000 to over $700,000, according to his dealer. Besides the Guggenheim, he has a solo show opening Thursday at the Haunch of Venison gallery in New York, and he is working on a project for the Vancouver Olympics next February.

One of his best-known works is "Under Scan," a project last winter that involved mounting projectors over a section of London's Trafalgar Square that were programmed to transmit video images onto the shadows of passersby. The videos, which depicted other people waving or blowing kisses, faded away if ignored. At least 55,000 people stopped by to play with their interactive shadows, according to David Hill, director of ArtReach, a cultural-event manager who helped produce the work. "It was fun but also slightly freaky," Mr. Hill says.
Much of Mr. Lozano-Hemmer’s work is made to mischievous effect. His 2005 piece at the Tate Modern, "Subtitled Public," uses surveillance technology to detect the presence of people in a room. Once they’re located, a spotlight is triggered to project a random verb onto people's torsos, such as "bleeds" or "urinates." Depending on the word, which follows the subject around, the effect can be comical or unsettling.

The son of Mexico City nightclub owners, Mr. Lozano-Hemmer was initially drawn to the orderly world of science, studying chemistry in college and working at a molecular recognition lab in Montreal. But he says he couldn't resist joining in the creative antics of his artist friends—he once set himself on fire during an avant-garde performance. (He suffered second-degree burns on both arms.) He decided to pursue a career that merged his two interests.

He got his big break just over a decade ago by projecting text onto 60-foot-tall shadows thrown against an arsenal wall during an architectural biennial in Austria. That led to exhibits at technology fairs and a commission for Mexico City's millennium celebration. In that piece, "Vectorial Elevation," he set up 18 searchlights around Zócalo Square and invited the public to email their designs for a light show. More than 800,000 people complied, and it took two weeks to churn through most of their zigzag light patterns.

"When people first saw the cinematograph, they sat sideways in the theater so they could watch the screen and the projector," Mr. Lozano-Hemmer says. "I like devices, but I want to create a shared experience."

The Guggenheim raised around $100,000 to commission the artist's voice-color project, which coincides with the museum's retrospective of Vasily Kandinsky, says Charles Fabius, the museum's consulting producer for works and process. Mr. Lozano-Hemmer says he studied Kandinsky's jewel-toned abstracts, read essays on color theory and scoured the artist's 1909 plan to produce an experimental theater piece called "Yellow Sound."

Were Kandinsky still alive, Mr. Lozano-Hemmer thinks, the modern master would add the computer to his palette too. "My computer has 16 million colors," he says.

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