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An interactive show with unsettling devices

By Richard Clayton

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Plenty of artworks set the pulses racing; not many actually measure your heart rate. Taking my lead from the high-tech installation artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who is giving me the preview tour, I place a digit into a sensor on the wall. It scans my fingerprint while obtaining a cardiogram. After a couple of seconds, my biometric “portrait” joins about 500 others, each blinking away to its own beat, on an electronic chequerboard of photographed skin.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in the Manchester gallery

“Pulse Index” (2010) is the first piece in *Recorders*, the latest show by this amiable, 43-year-old Mexican-Canadian, which opens this weekend at the Manchester Art Gallery. Over the past few years, Lozano-Hemmer has gained an international reputation for large-scale, interactive exhibits involving either publicly programmable spotlights (“Vectorial Elevation”) or communal shadow-play (“Body Movies”, “Under Scan” and “Frequency and Volume”). In autumn 2008, he had three projects running concurrently in London – at the Barbican and Haunch of Venison galleries, and in Trafalgar Square. Among the eight works presented in Manchester (three of which are world premieres) are some of his most intimate and unsettling devices yet.

“As you can see, it’s quite disgusting,” the artist laughs good-naturedly, as I recoil from the wiggling earthworm of my blown-up fingerprint. “Biometric technologies are supposed to discover or highlight what’s unique in us,” he says. “Here, they become a kind of landscape, abstracted like a tableau.” It’s true: what’s particular about me merges into the general mass. Stepping back, difference becomes similarity. The way that the panels pair up, the projection resembles nothing so much as rows of jiggling bum cheeks. Lozano-Hemmer laughs again. I’m reminded of Spencer Tunick’s by now rather tiresomely familiar al fresco collages of naked volunteers – and then, more solemnly, that all flesh is grass.

It’s rare for Lozano-Hemmer’s work to be this visceral. His primary concern is with “materialising” or “making tangible” the various surveillance systems that surround us in daily life, especially in Britain with its “mind-boggling” number of CCTV cameras. Yet he relishes any resonances his “platforms” trigger beyond how they function as mere bits of kit. “Pulse Room” (2006) turns a larger exhibition space into an illuminated cloister: grab hold of another sensor and your heart rhythm is translated exactly into the flicker of one of 100 tungsten light bulbs. As with the progress of “Pulse Index”, every new person’s bulb will nudge “your” bulb one along – until it reaches the end of the line and disappears.

“Each filament can reflect the strength or weakness of an individual pulse,” Lozano-Hemmer explains. “The effect isn’t stroboscopic – it won’t cause any seizures – but it’s kind of disorienting to see them all [at once]. It creates patterns that I like to compare, pretentiously, to intense minimalist music such as Steve Reich’s.”

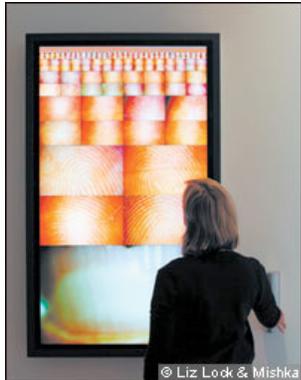


Detail from ‘Pulse Room’

“The more connections we may be able to find to precedents, the richer the work,” Lozano-Hemmer says. This is why he prefers “relational” to “interactive” when describing his approach, and “intermedia” to “electronic” when categorising its form. “Intermedia” was a term coined by the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins (1938-1998) – “a really extraordinary man”, whom he met and befriended – and is bound up with the idea of performance. It’s us, though, who are the principal performers. What Lozano-Hemmer abhors is the phrase “new media” since it implies “a certain sense of the frontiersman, of originality; to me, it’s related to the Wired magazine phenomenon, to a Californian ideology”. But didn’t Wired, the new-media bible, make you its artist of the year in 2003, I ask. “Yes, I was happy [to be so],” he smiles, “and I see where they’re coming from, but anyone who regards this stuff as new is ill-informed.”

Most of the content in *Recorders* is, in the jargon, “crowd-sourced”. With “People on People”, the newest shadow-play installation, visitors are immediately “tracked, rotoscoped and composited” (well, their images are) by computer. These images will later be projected as animations inside the silhouettes of different people in the space. The aim is to engender awareness of what Lozano-Hemmer calls “co-presence” – that we are always both observer and observed, networked, subject to other realities and memories. And here’s where he makes his law-and-order pitch: “Imagine that instead of taking images away from us and assuming suspicion, CCTV gave us images. If we made all the cameras into projectors, my theory is that it would make for a safer society, as having all this imagery to contend with and relate to would force us to talk to other people.” It’s eccentric, but it might be worth a try.

“I think of art as a good party,” Lozano-Hemmer says. “You need to invite people and give them the music and the lights and the drinks and whatever, but ultimately the party is made by the people who are in it.”



Detail from 'Pulse Index'

In Manchester, it’s sure to be “Microphones” (2008) that gets the party started. Ten vintage mikes are arranged in a circle. When you speak into one, it records your voice but instantly plays back another recording. It’s 50/50 as to whether this “echo” is the track that came straight before yours or one randomly selected from an archive of some 600,000 tracks.

“I don’t know what the results will be because it’s experimental,” the artist confesses. “Will there be some moronic input? Yes, there’ll be some of that. And some touching stuff? Maybe. People can be very sophisticated, too, which is quite gratifying. There’s no censorship, but having the mikes in a circle should help with self-regulation. I mean, people in the park don’t just stand there and insult each other, do they?”

The virtue of “Microphones”, as with the shadow-playing, is that it elicits local character and galvanises a public. The experience of previous stagings suggests Mancunians will use this power – carnivalesque to those, like the artist, who know their critical theory – responsibly. Despite the endorsement of having had his work bought by the Tate and New York’s MoMA, Lozano-Hemmer believes the real bad-mouthing is likely to come from within the art establishment. “I predict this show will tank critically,” he says. “I predict that it will be called gadgetry or a science fair or some kind of technological demonstration. And I’m ready for that.”

The reason he expects such opprobrium, he says, is because he goes against the “paternalistic and condescending attitude that the public should be there to clock the statistics, have everything interpreted for them, and then go to the shop”. By contrast, works such as “Microphones” have “zero critical distance”. In other words, there’s no lurking in the corner of this gig. It’s a show that seems, superficially, to be about technology but which makes you acutely conscious of your physicality. But though you may feel awkward, there’s no need to feel shy. The ghosts in these machines are just people.

'Recorders', Manchester Art Gallery until January 30, 2011 www.manchestergalleries.org