

# RUSSH

## Artist / Rafael Lorano-Hemmer

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It is difficult to envision a looking glass that reflects more than the face in front of it, more than fluttering eyelids and thick brow ridges, deeper images than those of skull and scalp. A mirror that prompts introspection, conversation, one that challenges personal ideals.

In his large-scale installation projects, electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has held mirrors to audiences in the most venerated galleries (New York's Guggenheim and MoMA among them), lit up public squares with LED lights and used tracking and surveillance systems to lay out maps of passing faces. He aims, through majestic kinetic sculptures and interactive projections, to examine the complex relationships people have with technology. To connect them with their hopes and fears, tease out their hidden degeneracies. With all the deftness of a master-craftsman, he creates deceptively simple installations that serve as a "perverse mirror" of his public. "The artwork is more like a platform, a building, that senses and listens and sees the public and reacts to what they are doing," the Mexican-born artist explains. "Once I present the work, I no longer have a monopoly over how people will use it."

Lozano-Hemmer began exhibiting his highly-technical pieces in 1990, a year after he graduated with a degree in Physical Chemistry from Concordia University in Montreal ("I'm a nerd," he says, laughing). Since then, he has firmly etched his name as one of our eras most noteworthy electronic artists – exhibiting in the Biennales of eight cities, receiving two BAFTA (British Academy) Awards for

Interactive Art and nabbing an elusive Golden Nica award, a trophy sculpted in the image of the golden Grecian Nike. He was the first artist to officially represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale, something he reflects on as "a great honour".

When he speaks down the prickly telephone receiver, it's a million miles a minute – he pauses only to steal a quick, rare breath or correct a turn of phrase. There is always too much to say, too many words ready for selection. It quickly becomes apparent that his installations (some taking years to tweak) call him to be more than just an artist. He must play the role of planner and architect, of technician, of robotics expert and engineer. Though he usually works with others (he brought a team of 11 to his solo show *Recorders* at Sydney's MCA this year), he must work tirelessly as grand visionary, tweaking works to perfection.

It was in Canada that Lozano-Hemmer first saw the possibilities of working with technology, where constantly evolving phenomena are seen as both beautiful and natural – a sort of second skin. At 17, when he moved there from his native Mexico, Lozano-Hemmer found himself awakened to the notion that works about technology and globalisation need not only serve as cautionary tales, but provide a platform for both introspection and open dialogue. "Canada very much invests on the idea that technology is not a tool but a language inside of us. Even if you're a painter, your public watch eight hours of screen-time a day," he says. "Technology is inevitable. It's a part of our politics, our economics; our culture. It's just natural that artists should accept the need to work with these tools."



It takes a lot of courage to completely relinquish control over a project so beloved, to step back and let an unknown audience interpret and twist the face of what you've ached over for months or years. To let go of everything in you that wants to be prescriptive and just see what happens. And yet that is what Lozano-Hemmer does, time and time again. Hangs his works for all to see like a moon over a city in public galleries and city squares; lets his public play hide-and-seek beneath their light. Take a work such as 33 Questions per Minute. A computer system programs grammatical rules to combine words into phrases, generating up to 55 billion automated questions. These flicker across tiny LCD screens at a rate of 33 per minute – the perfect rate for readers' mental transmission. Audiences can add questions or comments on a nearby keyboard, all of which are automatically added into the system.

There's something quite calming in taking part in the process of this automated poetry, something hopeful in adding humanity to what might seem quite a clinical process. A pure simplicity in the egalitarian means of audience contribution. And yet the story behind the work is intensely personal – as they all are for Lozano-Hemmer – he just lets his public find connections of their own. He leaves his own story unwritten. "In the case of 33, it's a very specific story," says Lozano-Hemmer. "My dad was in the emergency care unit of the hospital ... He could not speak because he had a respirator. So I made a board where he could choose the words so he could express himself, because he could not even write. And I remember thinking, what a responsibility to choose which words to put on the board. Do you put things like fear and death, all the existential questions I was asking myself? I remember my mum told me later that my dad was actually checking out the nurses ... It would have never occurred to me that his thoughts were something to do with sex! I love this mistake. Who gets to choose these words?"

Like so many before him, Lozano-Hemmer's fascination with audience autonomy draws from a grand tradition in post-modernity – one that sees the public as far more than passive voyeurs. The final appearance of a work is often crowd-sourced, it's eccentricity derived from viewers actions and reactions. "It's like throwing a party and hoping people will come," he says. "The worst thing that could happen is nobody cares or shows up."

One of his most well-known works that does this is Body Movies, where thousands of photographs of the exhibiting city's streets are materialised in projections of between 400 and 1800 square meters. The shape of the projections is entirely decided by the shadows of passers-by, their silhouettes constructed by heavy light sources on the ground. It's a tactic that breathes love into large, congested cities, promoting intimacy over distance, familiarity over isolation. The results need not always be positive however – Hemmer notes with works such as Recorders that he would be just as content if audiences left with a sense of questioning and rejection, felt the violence of surveillance in a way they had not before. The point is to cause people to stop, to think.

"Marcel Duchamp once said 'it is the look that makes a painting'," says Lozano-Hemmer with offhanded familiarity, as though referring to a phrase of an old friend. "I like that. It acknowledges that without the public, the work does not exist."