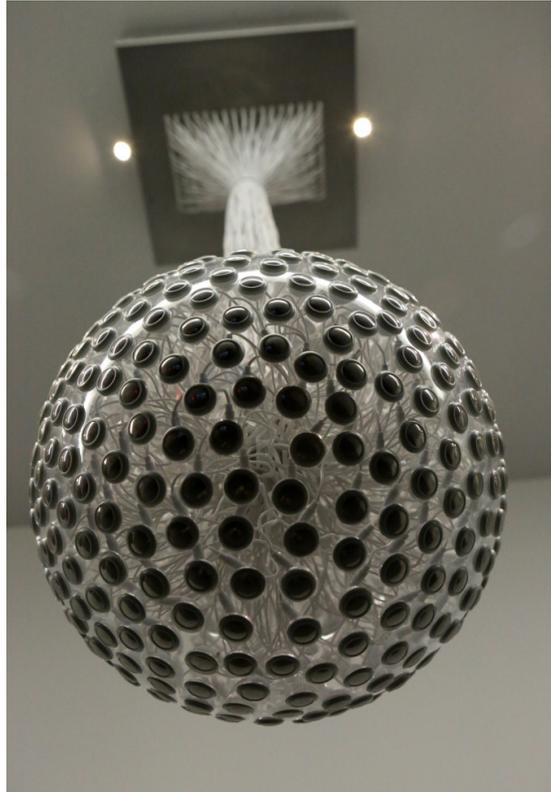


# Approaching Technology as a Second Skin

By Devon Van Houten Maldonado



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Sphere Packing: Wolfgang A. Mozart" (2014)  
(all photos by Verónica Rosales unless otherwise noted, all images courtesy the artist)

MEXICO CITY — Walking through Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pseudomatisms* feels like being inside a cyborg or supercomputer. The exhibition seems to be alive — seeing, breathing, and singing, complete with a beating heart. Known for complex interactive installations, Lozano-Hemmer's work, now on view at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), bridges the gap between artist and viewer through participation, inviting you to leave something behind and take something away.

*Pseudomatisms* has its own memory, too, with large evolving databases and hard drives that record and reproduce images of the visitors. Each piece represents an enormous engineering challenge and the artist is quick to point out that the work is made possible by a multifaceted team of makers and thinkers. Additionally, in the interest of participation, all of the code and software created for the exhibition was made publicly available in open source formats and the bilingual show catalogue is available as a free download on the museum's website. Being "open source" is key to the Mexican-born, Canadian-raised artist's work. Not only is the work participatory, but the artist's hand is completely absent. Furthermore, the work almost always necessitates outside sources, from statistics to live video. Many of the pieces function as input-output machines, or feedback loops.



Installation view of 'Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pseudomatisms' at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Entering the exhibition, one of the artist's most famous works, "Vicious Circular Breathing," greets viewers with the sounds of pumps and valves circulating air inside crackling paper bags. The installation stretches the length of the gallery, resembling a giant squid robot. Tentacle-like tubes stretch from a large hermetically sealed chamber, where viewers are invited to breathe the same air as everyone who has experienced the work before them. In theory, that means people who enter the glass room, through a decompression chamber, share all of their bacteria and viruses with every other person who has occupied the space. Complete with asphyxiation and panic warnings, there is a cold, medical formality to the work, which makes walking into the chamber a little intimidating. It's as if the machine were trying to mimic or create a panic attack by breathing through the paper bags, which inflate and deflate at the same rate as the average human, around 10,000 cycles per day. In the show catalogue, Lozano-Hemmer cited Marina Abramović and Ulay's 1977 performance work "Breathing In / Breathing Out (Death Itself)," Marcel Duchamp's "50 cc of Paris Air" (1919), among others, as inspiration.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Vicious Circular Breathing" (2013)

Stress, contamination, surveillance, and death create a dark undertone throughout the exhibition. A wall of speakers blares national anthems, arranged according to the particular nation's murder rate. Other works have a more subtle melancholy. Machines seem desperate to embody some measure of being human, but always fall short, endlessly trapped in closed circuits and doomed to observe, listen, and circulate. In fact, the works lack the natural element necessary for any emotional expression, until a human enters the space and activates the machine. Were it not for the visitors walking through the museum, the work wouldn't come to life. "Technology is like a second skin," Lozano-Hemmer said

during the press walkthrough. His work perpetuates the idea of technology as an inevitable result of our own evolution, not something outside of it.

In one gallery with soaring ceilings, the walls are lit up with large-scale projections showing the faces of the visitors to the space. Cameras and computers use facial recognition software to pair the viewer's face with faces in the artwork's memory. Seeing oneself projected, large format, within an art installation creates an uneasy self-consciousness. It also offers insight into the way that machines see us. In today's world of multilayered surveillance on the internet and streets, from the air and from space, the work illuminates the coldness of computer vision.



Installation view of 'Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pseudomatisms' at the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

The heart and highlight of the show, "Pulse Room," another famous work, is a dark gallery full of incandescent light bulbs, which emit a warm yellow glow and pulse rhythmically. In one corner there is a handgrip heart rate monitor and one bulb hanging below the rest. The viewer approaches and grasps the two handles. At first, nothing happens, but about 10 seconds later the entire room of 200 light bulbs begins to pulse along with the heartbeat of the person gripping the heart rate monitor. Your individual and unique heartbeat filling the gallery is an empowering, nearly out-of-body experience. As you release the handgrips, all the light bulbs go out, except one directly above your head, where your unique heartbeat is visualized for a split second before progressively joining the symphony of previous viewers' hearts, stored in the memory of the artwork. Through mechanized intimacy, Lozano-Hemmer steals your heart and claims it as art.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pseudomatisms continues the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) through March 27.