

art

Digital Art & the Platforms for Participation

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED ARTIST, RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER, PREMIERES HIS LATEST WORK, *RECORDERS*, AT MANCHESTER ART GALLERY THIS SEPTEMBER.

Artists have experimented with digitisation since its inception. Early pioneers such as Eadweard Muybridge broke new ground with his zoopraxiscope (1879) and by using multiple cameras, he captured images of motion. This movement progressed heavily into the 20th century with artists experimenting with light, motion and kinetics.

Digital art and media evolved from the notion of interactivity. In *Art and Electronic Media* (2009), Edward Shanken asserts: "Defying the traditional conception of art as a static object, in the early twentieth century artists began to introduce motion into their work, making explicit the continuity of consciousness in the perception of art through time and space. Later, in the 1950s, embracing the science of cybernetics, Nicolas Schöffer collaborated with engineers to incorporate electronic sensors, controls and motors into sculptures that responded to the movement of viewers, performers or atmospheric conditions. Such works laid a significant foundation for subsequent developments in interactive art incorporating digital multimedia." This experimentation guided art in another direction, combining the aesthetics of traditional art forms, such as painting or sculpture, but through technology this medium developed within an entirely different context.

This September, *Recorders*, an exhibition of interactive artworks by Mexican-Canadian artist, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, opens at Manchester Art Gallery. Lozano-Hemmer has gained international acclaim for using digital technologies to create artworks that provide "critical platforms for public participation", which are often staged in public spaces such as Trafalgar Square, New York City's Madison Square Park and Zocalo Square in Mexico City. Lozano-Hemmer's work is the culmination of decades of technological advancements, but his intricate creative practice makes the works poignant, contemplative and explorative.

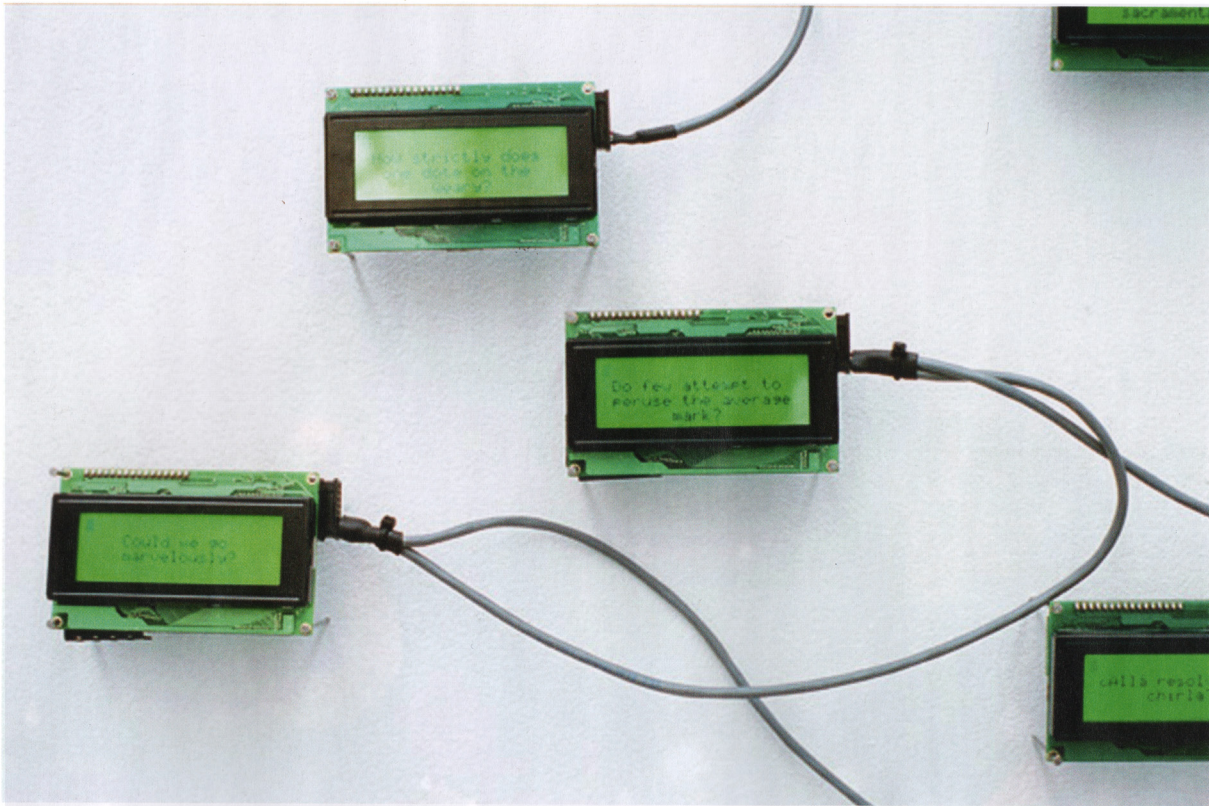
People on People (2010) is a major new installation inspired by portraiture and shadowplays. As visitors walk around the exhibition space, they will see the live and recorded image of other visitors projected within their own shadows. Meanwhile, they will also be filmed for live or delayed playback inside the shadow of someone else. Using sophisticated computerised surveillance cameras, this immersive artwork is both portentous and playful, creating an intimate relationship between artist, audience and piece. *Recorders* also features five specially adapted pieces that have never been on public display in England before, including the artist's contribution to the Mexican pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 2007, the seminal *Pulse Room*.

Other works in the show include *33 Questions per Minute* (2000), a computer programme that generates 55 billion different, grammatically correct questions at a rate of 33 per minute. It would take over 3000 years to ask all possible questions, but the artwork also invites visitors to introduce their own questions into the automatic flow. *Pulse Room* will see one of the gallery's major exhibition spaces filled with 100 light bulbs, which are activated by a sensor to flash at the exact rhythm of the participant's heart. *Microphones* (2008) features ten vintage microphones, modified to record the voice of visitors and simultaneously play back the voice of a previous participant as an echo. Past and present participants appear to interact in an incoherent dialogue. *Pulse Index* (2010) records and displays participants' fingerprints at the same time as their heart rates. *Recorders* significantly contributes to the discourse of digital culture, while simultaneously forging a redefinition for digital art, commenting on the impact of technology as a means for creative expression.

Recorders opens at Manchester Art Gallery on 18 September and continues until 30 January 2011. It is also part of the Abandon Normal Devices (AND) Festival of New Cinema and Digital Culture. www.manchestergalleries.org



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Room*, 2006.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *3 Questions per Minute*, 2000.

Q&A with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

Your work is known for its ability to create interplay between the built environment, urban design and the people who use those spaces. This is integral to your work, can you tell me how you first noticed this area of art and society, and how you began to explore it?

In 1992, after getting a degree in chemistry and doing performance art for several years, I started hanging out with Emilio López-Galiacho and other architects who hated architecture. Emilio often said that when architects talked about “intelligent buildings” they were referring to self-regulating AC systems, efficient fuzzy-logic elevator dispatch algorithms, computerised blinds and other techniques for maximising worker output, and yet buildings had no intelligence to the outside, to public space... no public feedback mechanisms. There was a big opportunity to take on parasitic and interstitial approaches to reconnect public space, architecture and the virtual. Most of my work involves the creation of “platforms for participation”, where the public may establish relationships with each other, with the built environment or with certain curated contexts. Depending on the piece these emergent relationships are eccentric, poetic, critical or even perverse.

Your work is a complex mix of theatrical performance, re-defining architecture, technological wonder and digital sculpture; can you tell me how you balance these aspects in order to create the finished works?

It depends on the piece. Often my work seeks to amplify and empower the public, to create intimacy and agency; other times I want to create predatorial environments that police, track, brand or classify the public, in order to create an almost Brechtian rejection and visualisation of technological correctness (like the fallacy that advanced surveillance equipment can make our cities safer from terrorists). Sometimes I develop pieces that emerge from an experimental and formal approach, working with new techniques at the studio for instance, while others respond to the constraints of a very specific commission. There is not really a balance.

People on People dislocates the familiarity of the self and expectations of

the self; can you tell me about the ideas and inspiration behind it?

The ideas for this project are pretty much along the lines of many other critical investigations in visual representation. How do we see ourselves? What traces do we leave behind? How do we perform our absence? The piece is inspired by Adolfo Bioy Casares novel *Morel's Invention* (1941), in which the protagonist falls in love with a woman who turns out to be a three-dimensional representation captured and played-back by a post-photographic device. Ultimately, an important aspect of this project is that in order to see the recording or live image of someone else within your own shadow you are yourself recorded for future viewers. There are notions of Otherness, complicity and puppetry that I hope are elicited.

There's immediacy within your work, can you tell me how this reflects the value system of our culture and identity, for example, the individual vs. the masses?

Immediacy is to be avoided in art! I hope my work does not have that. The exhibition *Recorders* in Manchester is precisely designed to reject a Pavlovian pattern of immediate action and reaction. In Manchester the installations all have memory, and through this memory is a sense of time interfering, that the pieces are noisy, out of control, indeterminate, diversely populated. It is within ambiguity and slowness that poetry may happen, if we are lucky.

33 Questions per Minute is also one of the works in the Manchester show, can you tell me more about this piece and the impossibility of asking 55 billion questions in a lifetime, ultimately reminding the participant of their mortality?

It is a piece not unlike the surrealist's exquisite corpse, within the long tradition of automatic poetry. It generates grammatically correct questions, but it never repeats the same one. They are usually absurd, “will you bleed in an orderly fashion?” and they are presented at a rate of 33 per minute, the threshold of legibility, in 21 small liquid crystal displays. Using a keyboard, people may enter their own questions to be shown within the computer-generated



questions. Public participation is also automatically uploaded to the internet. The project was originally developed for the Havana Biennial in 2000 as I heard that Cubans could not have internet access. As a Mexican-Canadian, I could order a connection and use it in my installation. Any question typed into the keyboard could not be censored by the authorities, because it was impossible for them to know if the question was written by the computer or by a person. So in a way, I hoped that critical questions would be camouflaged by the computer-generated output. The piece worked well, except I thought that people would reflect on the political situation in the country and instead most entries were sexual in nature. I love unexpected outcomes.

***Pulse Room* connects “man” and technology, reminding us that we’re made up of energy; can you tell me more about the ideas behind this piece?**

When my wife was pregnant with twins, we listened to their different heart-rates simultaneously, which produced a pattern similar to what you might hear in minimalist music. I wanted to expand that into something that could be appreciated visually. I was also inspired by the film *Macario* (1960) by Roberto Gavaldón, in which the protagonist has a hunger-induced hallucination where every living person is represented by a flickering candle. In *Pulse Room* you see the flicker of people who have left their heart recordings behind. The piece is meant to amplify intimate biometric data into an abstract collective representation.

What legacy can digital art leave? What are its messages and how does it continuously re-examine modes of communication?

Perfect digital reproduction, the fact that a copy is identical to the original, asks us to re-examine Benjamin’s notion of the disappearance of the “aura” due to mechanical reproduction. If you think of digital art as a set of instructions, a source code, then it is something akin to Sol Lewitt’s “art of instructions,” a meta-description for a particular effect. Many artists working with technology look for ways to create works that may have an honorable death – choosing

materials that can age beautifully, for example: the incandescent light bulbs used in *Pulse Room* are now illegal in most countries. Conversely, a lot of performance art is ephemeral, and that is what attracts me to it. The legacy may not be material, but certainly good performance art leaves a tangible and effective impact on people.

Another aspect of digital art/culture is that underlying necessity of technology; but it’s constantly changing, how do you continue to create and innovate within this medium?

I firmly believe that technology is inevitable, that as McLuhan would say, it is “our second skin” and that we cannot pretend to know what it would be like to be outside of it. Even if you are not doing digital art we can’t escape technological culture: your public watches four hours of TV a day, the bank knows what, where and when you buy anything, your government is supported by virtual capital, even if you are in a remote area of Mexico with no computer or telephone the decisions that are being made through trans-national networks of corporate control affect you directly. So the first thing one must do with technological art is to get rid of words like “new”, “innovate” and “future.” Technology is like a language, not a tool.

Finally, can you tell me what you have planned for the future? Do you have any new projects underway?

I am touring a new public art project called *Solar Equation*, which is basically a scale model of the Sun, only 100 million times smaller than the real thing. It is a huge balloon that is animated by live mathematical equations that simulate the turbulence, flares and sunspots that can be seen on the surface of the Sun. We have been working with NASA to make sure that the piece is as faithful as possible. The piece was commissioned by Federation Square in Melbourne, where it was shown this summer.

Cherie Federico