



Under Scan: Passersby trigger videos projected on the pavement of people who then 'interact' with them.

Canadian artist hits the switch in Trafalgar

Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer hopes his extraordinary light show will make strangers talk to each other

BY ELIZABETH RENZETTI LONDON

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is in Trafalgar Square, cursing the skies. Not literally, you understand: The Mexican-Canadian artist is too jovial and unflappable for that. But he'd like a bit of co-operation on the precipitation front, as he's trying to install his giant interactive light show, *Under Scan*, in one of the world's most famous public squares.

"Man, do you think we could get some Mexican weather for a while," he asks, turning his Buddy Holly glasses to the sky, which remains a steadfast shade of London drab. It's just stopped raining after pouring for two days, and it's put his team of engineers behind schedule.

Under Scan essentially involves passersby triggering, and interacting with videos of people that will be projected on the square's pavement. That requires two of the world's most powerful projectors to flood the square with light, and the crane meant to hoist one of those projectors is wheezing and tilting and refusing to rise. Maybe it needs some Viagra. "It needs machine Viagra!"

Lozano-Hemmer says with a laugh. "I'm going to go throw some iPods at it." Then he looks up at the sky.

Britain is, famously, one of the most spied-upon nations on earth, with 4.2 million security cameras spread around the country. In Trafalgar Square and its surrounding streets, they are everywhere: attached to buildings and traffic lights and lampposts, so commonplace they blend into the background.

Lozano-Hemmer has long been fascinated with the technology of surveillance culture, and *Under Scan* is a way to subvert the relationship between the watcher and the subject. It's a vast project, two years in the making, employing a thousand volunteers and funding from U.K. and Canadian sources. Let's not forget the two ultra-bright projectors, each emitting, a press release says, "110,000 lumens of light." Which is apparently a lot.

The artist seems a little leery about the hype — after all, he's the author of *Perverting Technological Correctness*, an essay that blasts the macho world of techno one-upmanship: My pixel count's bigger than yours,

my digital projector's gonna kick some ass. "It's true we have the world's brightest projectors in this show," he says, his natural exuberance tempered a bit. "But when people read that, they have expectations of what they're going to get, and I can guarantee you they will be disappointed if they're expecting some sort of firework display. This is the most intimate thing I've ever done."

What happens on the north terrace of Trafalgar Square, from dusk till midnight Nov. 23, is this: A passerby walking through the brightly lit terrace will trigger a computerized scanning system, and a video projection will appear in his shadow — a previously videotaped person, who will "interact" with the viewer. That is, the person in the projection will begin to respond in some way to the viewer — by blowing kisses, dancing, stripping, speaking in sign language. (The volunteers agreed to be filmed, some for as few as 10 seconds, some for three minutes, and were free, in the artist's words, "to self-represent.")

The projection fades when the viewer walks away, and then he can go on to trigger another.

What Lozano-Hemmer hopes is that Joe Pedestrian, instead of scurrying across Trafalgar Square in search of a beer or a bus, actually slows down, stops, begin playing with people projected on the pavement and perhaps even talking to the guy standing next to him. That's what happened in Nottingham and Leicester, where *Under Scan* was previously installed. (It was commissioned by a regional U.K. government.) Children, in particular, shrieked in delight as their shadows caused people to pop up in unexpected places. "I don't want to get all United Colours of Benetton," Lozano-Hemmer says, "but what we've already seen with this piece is that people who don't know each other will turn around and start talking to each other.

"I've always defended this romantic element of making people occupy the streets rather than shopping. This idea that it is radical to be in space and not just go home or to work, but to occupy it and make it yours."

Even during its installation, the bright lights and malfunctioning crane have drawn a crowd, while in their midst Lozano-Hemmer calmly makes suggestions to his crew. If anyone can distract the hordes of snap-happy tourists and hustling office workers, it's this 40-year-old Concordia University chemistry grad, who's now a whiz at merging technology and art in dazzling public displays. He's become sought-after in the past few years among museums and collectors for his media art, and from local governments who want a crowd-pleasing installation that catches the eye while making the mind click over.

The 1.1 million visitors who experienced his *Pulse Front* at the 2007 Luminato Festival in Toronto will remember this: He invited them to place their hands on a console and have that pulse translated, Zeus-like, in lights across the sky.

The idea for *Pulse Front* came from listening to a sonogram of his then unborn twins' heartbeats (he and his wife also have another daughter, 4). He laughs: "a bit cheesy, I know." These so-called "pulse works" have become a signature. There's another, *Pulse Tank*, at the Haunch of Venison gallery in London. In a small room at the top of the gallery, participants each put a finger into a tube suspended in water: Each

person's pulse registers as an electronic thump and as a wave in the water, which casts shadows on the wall — the more participants, the more intricate the pattern. It's impossible not to talk to the person next to you when your heartbeats are pounding together like weird Euro-disco.

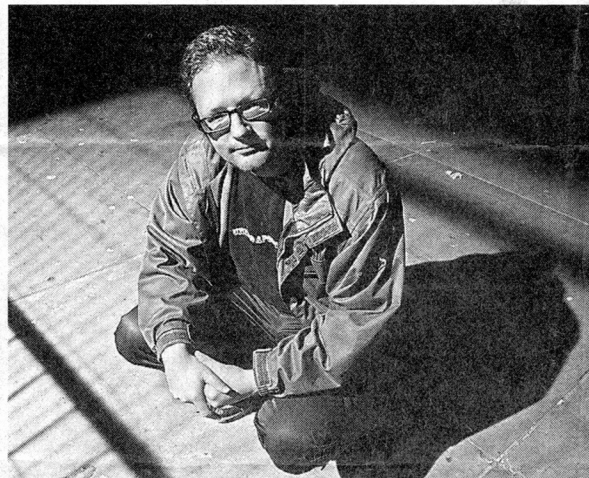
Lozano-Hemmer develops these projects, along with a team of 13 software engineers, in a studio in Montreal, where he went to school and where his wife's family is based. The Canadian government is terrific at helping out with research and development grants, but until Luminato, he'd never had a piece installed in the country he's called home since he emigrated from Mexico at age 17. "I was very unhappy," he says. "I thought, 'Why? Why do I get Canada Council grants to go to Japan and Holland, but I don't do anything here?'" Part of the problem was that everyone who approached him wanted to slap a giant corporate logo on his work. "I've always said, 'Sorry, you're working in a public space, you're establishing a relationship of trust. The moment you flash a logo, people see it as a crass advertisement, an imposition, rather than a gift.'" Telus, the sponsor of Luminato, was alone in understanding that, he says.

While the vehicle of his work is state-of-the-art technology and computer software, Lozano-Hemmer bristles at the term "new media." He sees himself as part of an artistic line stretching from Spanish painter Diego Velazquez in the 17th century through the French tradition of *son-et-lumière* shows to American minimalist Dan Flavin's fluorescent light tubes, but the importance of the wired world to our lives can't be discounted, and it's the artist's job to wrestle with that: "I always defend it as a very Canadian lesson: McLuhan's idea of technology as your second skin precludes us being outside it, and observing. This is not a tool, it's a language, and we can't think about what it would be like before that language. Pol Pot tried that, and it didn't go so well."

It's not raining in Trafalgar Square but the wind is up, and the crane, though it's risen slightly, is still wobbling precariously. "I hope it doesn't fall over and take out the National Gallery," Lozano-Hemmer says.

A guy with two gold teeth approaches and asks what's up. The artist explains that, in a couple days, he'll be able to walk through the square and find people dancing in his shadow. "Oh," says the man, as if he hears this every day. "You're raising the dead."

» *Under Scan* can be viewed in London's Trafalgar Square until Nov. 23:
(www.threecitiescreate.org.uk/_EMDA_Cultural_Quarters/).



Lozano-Hemmer is fascinated by the surveillance culture, and his vast *Under Scan* project is a way to subvert the relationship between the watcher and the subject. RANDY QUAN FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL