

PROFILE

Transforming light rays into e-mail messages

An award-winning multinational artist provokes tantalizing questions with light and electrons.

By **AYAKO KARINO**

Asahi Shimbun News Service

Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer thinks there aren't enough images in the garish neon district that surrounds JR Shibuya Station in Tokyo.

"The images you receive in the city are always monologues," said 36-year-old Mexican-born Lozano-Hemmer in a recent interview in Tokyo. "It's like, 'You come, buy this, do this, look like this.' They're never questions. But images should always be questions."

In that sense, cities today are in a crisis, says Lozano-Hemmer.

Recognizing the need for "more diversity of images and more, different people being able to get their images up there," Lozano-Hemmer has created innovative and interactive artworks.

For instance, in his series of what he calls "relational architecture"

installations, designed for cities in Europe and the Americas in the past seven years, Lozano-Hemmer has combined new technologies, urban environments and hands-on public participation. The pieces, presented at art biennales in Havana, Valencia and Liverpool, aim to help ease the alienation of people living

in today's era of globalization. He has won numerous awards for his works, most recently a World Technology Network Award for the Arts in San Francisco earlier this year.

As part of the grand opening of the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM), in the city of Yamaguchi, the electronic artist has created an installation called "Amodal Suspension," which will run from Nov. 1 to 24.

Lozano-Hemmer's light show will turn the night skies into a huge communications screen, using a network of 20 robotically controlled, 7,000-watt searchlights mounted on metal towers in and around the public space surrounding the

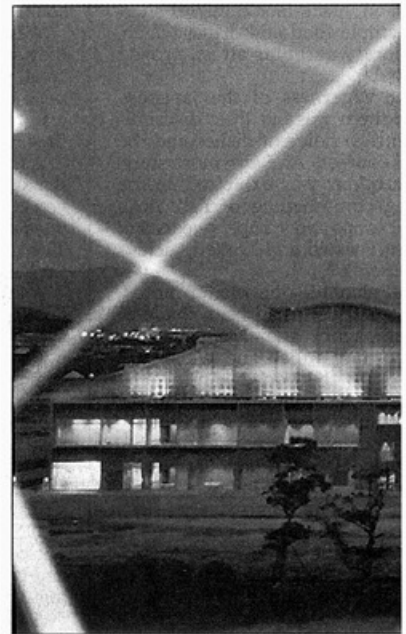


For fireflies, 'flashing is a communication method for mating. It's about sexuality. The notion that something as cold as light could become something as warm and interesting as sexuality inspired me.'

RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER
Electronic artist

new YCAM, a center that aims to explore the relationship between media and art. The spectacular light show will be visible from dusk to dawn and from up to 15 kilometers away. It's the first of its kind in any city in Asia.

But the brilliant show of intermittent strobe flashes that the artist envisions



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "Amodal Suspension" of the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media

won't be set in motion by Lozano-Hemmer. The lights will only be activated when a central computer receives short text e-mail or cellphone messages from people around the world via <www.amodal.net>. There will be local access kiosks set up around the YCAM site so that people on the spot can join in as the show continues each evening during its 24-day run.

Once the server receives a message, the computer converts it to an electrical signal that activates a searchlight.

"Then the messages go to the sky," Lozano-Hemmer said, "and they start circulating in a random manner from searchlight to searchlight."

"It's sort of like a labyrinth."

As each communication is received and transformed, it will flash across the sky in an open-air dance of light, and a message will be sent to the intended receiver, telling them "a message is waiting in the sky of Yamaguchi."

The message will continue bouncing in the sky until either the recipient or another person "catches" it by reading the e-mail message on a cellphone or computer via a link provided at <www.amodal.net>. The sender will also receive an automatic reply. Once someone removes a message from the dancing loop of light, it will briefly appear on a large screen at YCAM before being

