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Dark Mofo 2014
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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer shines light on Dark Mofo

The artist's work, which can be seen for miles, has both celebratory and disturbing implications



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A man operates a lever to move the lights around Sullivans Cove as part of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's Articated Intersect project.
Photograph: Rémi Chauvin/Mona

Every night for the duration of Hobart's Dark Mofo festival, 18 searchlights roam the night sky around Sullivans Cove, directed by levers on the ground which are free for the general public to operate. This spectacular sight, which can be seen for miles around, is Articated Intersect, an artwork by the Mexican-Canadian artist [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#), first staged in his home town of Montreal.

Lozano-Hemmer admits that Australia is getting a much more impressive version. "I don't want to tell the owners of the piece how much better it is in Australia than it was in Montreal," he chuckles down the phone from Canada, having left the "Australian winter" after installing the work. "It's nothing to do with Montreal, it's the setting – the reflection of the light on the water, the amount of what Australians call punters – it's been quite exciting to see."

The levers which operate the lights seem particularly popular with small boys, who were thronging the artwork when the Guardian took a look. "For sure," says Lozano-Hemmer, himself a dad of three. "It almost looks like Meccano but with lights, right? It does have that sensation of a joystick, of gaming, of light sabres, so it's natural that kids desire to have their small gestures amplified to an urban scale. Kids want to own most interactive artworks – it's a joy to see them experiment and try things out."



Articulated Intersect (Relational Architecture 18, 2011) by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer on the harbour in Hobart, Tasmania. Photograph: Roy Austen/Mona

Though the work may seem celebratory – Lozano-Hemmer's parents owned a nightclub in Mexico, so he grew up highly aware of the way lights can create a party atmosphere – his use of searchlights also has ominous implications. The artist points out that they were invented at the end of the 19th century and first used for big events like world expos. "But during the war they were used for anti-aircraft surveillance and Albert Speer used them as props in a spectacle of intimidation. In [the 1936 Nuremberg Nazi rally](#), the lights are organised in space to send a very clear message of: we are big and you are small."

Lozano-Hemmer also had the border between Mexico and America on his mind. "Searchlights not unlike this are used to track Mexican migrants at the border.

There's an awful paramilitary group called [the Minutemen](#), mostly in Arizona, who viciously try and search out illegal or undocumented workers coming into the country. So as well as the playful side there's that violence of predatory light, police interrogation, light that blinds you."

The artwork's position on the harbour is particularly relevant given [Operation Sovereign Borders](#), Australia's ultra-punitive policy towards asylum seekers, most of

whom attempt to arrive by boat. It's an issue Lozano-Hemmer spoke out about amid [the furore over Transfield's sponsorship of the Sydney Biennale](#). The company runs the detention centres on Nauru and Manus island; nine artists pulled out in protest before the Biennale severed its ties with the sponsor.

"It's not right to use art to clean up the image of certain corporations which should know better than to be involved in that thing," says Lozano-Hemmer. "I understand the entire society voted that [policy] in, but I think that we'll look back at it with deep embarrassment, as humans."



Crowds look at the lights at Dark Mofa's opening party. Photograph: Remi Chauvan/Mona

The artwork was challenging to install because of concerns that it might affect incoming planes and ships. "As you're setting up a project like this air traffic control and the harbourmaster need to know what we're doing and how we're pointing the lights. In addition we survey the site to ensure that the lights are not hitting targets. If you try to take your lever and point it at a nearby hotel or the flight path, it's not going to let you do that. In terms of the mathematics, that's the most difficult thing we did."

Last year Lozano-Hemmer made a work called [Friendfracker](#), which randomly deletes 10 friends from your Facebook account. Did he relish [the site crashing on Thursday](#)? "Yeah," he says. "Art is about interrupting the established routines of the quotidian. It has nothing to do with communication. Zero! Art is about ambiguity and interceptions and outages and silence and slowdowns. That opportunity to read different things out of the same text, as in poetry. Anything that makes us underline that silence is a wonderful performance."