

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

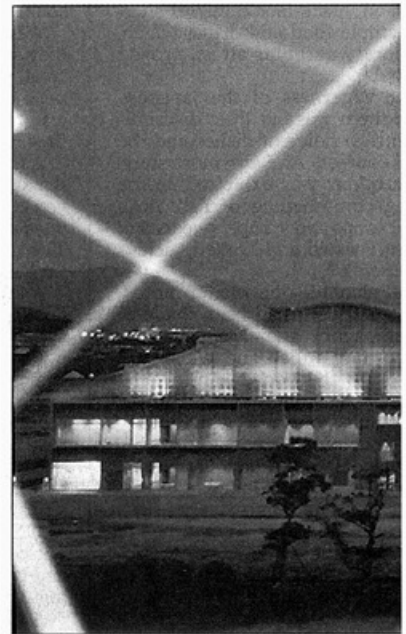


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RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER
Electronic artist

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.

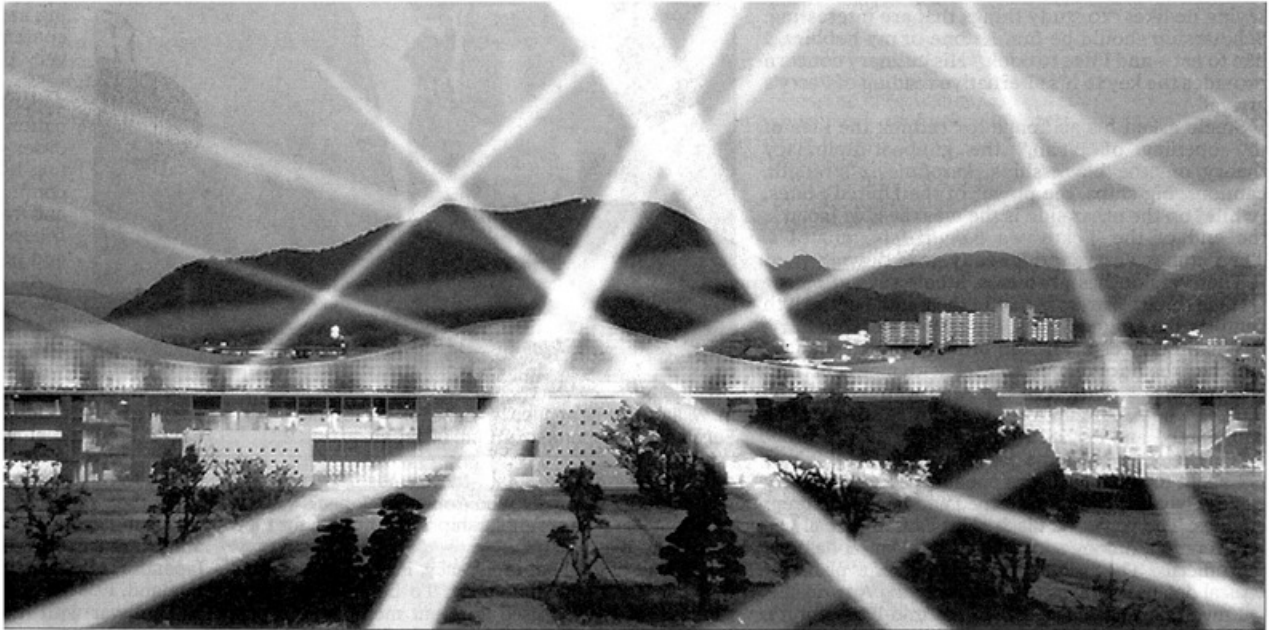
Once the server receives a message, the computer converts it to an electrical signal that activates a searchlight.

"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



YAMAGUCHI CENTER FOR ARTS AND MEDIA

sion" will highlight the Yamaguchi sky with searchlight beams triggered by digital messages in an installation to mark the grand opening a (YCAM), as shown in this computer-generated image.

stored in an Internet archive.

An automatic translation engine will add to the global aspect of the installation.

"What's more fun about the project is that when, for example, I send a message to you, someone else catches it—and then all of a sudden you are forced to understand that a message is not only something between two people," Lozano-Hemmer said. "I don't know what effect that will have, but I'm hoping it will bring out issues of community and how to use our cities. Unexpected relationships are what's important for me."

To add an extraterrestrial flavor to the event, the artist has arranged for the first message that opens "Amodal Suspension" on Nov. 1 to be sent by astronauts orbiting aboard the International Space Station at 7 p.m. local time (10 a.m. Greenwich Mean Time).

Lozano-Hemmer hopes the project will raise questions in viewers' minds about how people connect with each other—of interest especially in a regional city like Yamaguchi, which is about 1,000 kilometers from the teeming capital. The region is noted for a traditional lantern festival and fireflies that populate nearby fields, both of which Lozano-Hemmer experienced in his earlier visit to the area. These too inspired his interactive light show.

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

Lozano-Hemmer's multicultural upbringing may have influenced his idea of turning a public space into an interactive light poem. Born in Mexico City in 1967, Lozano-Hemmer moved with his family to Spain when he was 12. He later emigrated to Canada, where he earned a bachelor of science degree in physical chemistry in 1989 at Concordia University in Montreal and also married. He possesses three passports—Mexican, Canadian and Spanish—and says he feels as though "my country is my shoe, like the gypsies say. I feel at home in all three countries but I also feel like a foreigner in all three of them."

His interest in science has enhanced his ability to combine advanced technologies in his artworks. But it was not the ordered world of technology that inspired the artist/engineer.

"People ask me whether I work with technology because it's new," Lozano-Hemmer said with a laugh. "I always answer, 'I work with globalization and technology because it's an inevitable part of our society.'"

Lozano-Hemmer sees his job as giving

new readings to contemporary devices, things that we have come to accept without a second thought.

"I want to act on the global culture, [asking it] to not only accept, by using technologies in a way that they were not intended to be used," he emphasized.

"People are too efficient. I think it's important to slow it down a little bit and think critically about what these things mean," Lozano-Hemmer said.

"It's nice to just connect or briefly open up windows in between the different windows that coexist."

His "Amodal Suspension" may in fact be the perfect opportunity for us to not only visualize technology—in the aurora-like lights in the sky—but also actively join in creating an artistic expression of science's modern advances. We can even control it for once.

"Amodal Suspension—Relational Architecture 8" kicks off on Nov. 1 at 7 p.m. (6 p.m. from Nov. 2), and continues daily until Nov. 24 at the Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM) in Yamaguchi, Yamaguchi Prefecture (083-901-2222). Open 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. (light show will operate until 6 a.m.). Admission free. See <www.ycam.jp> for access. Send text messages via <www.amodal.net> by computer, cellphone or local access kiosk during the event.