

VIDA

Art and Artificial Life International Awards

The Genesis of VIDA: Interview with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer



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Widely recognised in the international contemporary art scene for his spectacular interactive installations in public spaces as well as his more intimate works that create dialogues with the viewer from a single screen, **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer** is one of the visionary artists who promoted the creation of the **VIDA 2.0** competition in 1999. Alongside **Susie Ramsay** and **Nell Tenhaaf**, he launched this project dedicated to the encounter between art and artificial life, which Fundación Telefónica has been promoting for 15 years now. Lozano-Hemmer explains how this project was born, his reflections on the relationship between art and science and the concept of artificial life.

Please tell us about the genesis of VIDA 2.0.

For several years I had been advising the Foundation for Art and Technology at Telefónica, with which we carried out a number of initiatives, from the exhibition "Arte Virtual, 12 propuestas de Arte Reactivo" ("Virtual Art, 12 Examples of Reactive Art" at the Ópera metro station in Madrid, in 1994, to the

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5th edition of the [Cyberconf](#), the International Conference on Cyberspace, held in Madrid in 1996. Working on these projects was a real pleasure, since we were able to bring together people who today are renowned as pioneers or critics of the intersection between art, technology and society.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. VIDA 7.0. Fundación Telefónica, 2004.

When we carried out these initiatives, we found that there was a real interest among the general public and specialists alike in Fundación Telefónica supporting this line of research. While there was already a Foundation for Art and Technology, it was divided into a technology section with a collection of

telephone switchboards dating back to the turn of the century, and section comprising a collection of cubist art, including works by Pablo Picasso and Juan Gris, among others. We focused on searching for the overlap between art and technology. At that point it became clear that what was most needed in Spain, and in Latin America, were funds for the work to be produced. There were the creators and the public was interested, but what was lacking were institutions, whether public or private, to support the production of emergent artworks focusing on somewhat risky topics

I have never really liked prizes, I have always viewed them with a certain irony because I do not think it is possible to determine that one piece is better than another. At the same time, however, a competition was the ideal way to more directly provide artists with funds for production. I mean, it was possible to spend the bare minimum of the budget on organising the award itself and most of it on the prize money for the awards that went to the creators. From the outset, we decided to give priority to Latin American and Hispanic artists because we saw a need to support the ideas from these regions of the world. At first the prize was divided between projects that were already defined and documented and those pending development but with a good idea or an interesting plan behind them. Another issue that was decided at that time was to focus the contest on a theme. We saw clearly that the category of electronic art was too broad, that there were too many different disciplines within electronic art, and for this reason it was essential to focus on a more specific topic.

Back then I was reading a lot about artificial life, and I was especially interested in the possibilities this research could have on art from a very broad perspective. The members of the awards panel reflect this approach in that they have always been very open. They have not done their work with a fundamentalist, defining or prescriptive premise of what artificial life is, but rather have understood this concept both literally and metaphorically. Thus, the original idea behind the approach of VIDA 2.0 was how can we understand life today, now that it is natural for it to be artificial?

What motivated Fundación Telefónica to promote this project focused on artificial life, rather than one dedicated to telecommunications?

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In my opinion, they were aware of the opportunity to promote a project that involved a still little-known and seldom-explored area, which was suffering a huge lack of support. Furthermore this initiative could have a big impact, particularly in Latin America, while it was not that interesting to compete with other initiatives that were already dedicated to electronic art in general. I researched the events that already existed and insisted on the need to promote something of our own. And it worked, especially when the first edition showed such a huge variety of projects covering the concept of artificial life: robots, software, viruses, virtual environments, pieces that generate poetry... It was clear that it was not a limited or overly exclusive concept.

What was also noteworthy was the perseverance and commitment involved in the development of VIDA. It is very common, both in Spain and Latin America, for initiatives to be set up that are hard to follow through with and continue. VIDA, meanwhile, has been running for so many years that we're talking about generations of artists whose work has been propelled by the award. In Mexico, for example, I have met artists who consider the VIDA award to be a key moment in their career, not so much for the monetary prize as for the legitimacy conferred by the award.

In the mid-1990s, it was certainly challenging to produce a project with robots or biotechnologies. Today, however, these resources are increasingly accessible. Do you think that artistic creation in this field is now more affordable, or does it still depend on subsidies for production like those of VIDA?

No, these days artistic creation with all kinds of technologies is more independent, but that does not mean they do not still need support, quite the contrary. What we are seeing is what I call a normalisation of the subject matter. I mean, we're not now seeing artificial life and the use of computers or algorithms as something which is alien to artistic practice. What is normal now is to use these technologies, because when smartphones include an assistant with artificial intelligence, when our daily choices are marked by a series of algorithms designed to predict our intentions and the endings of films are decided using voting systems, there is no aspect of our daily lives that is not affected by these technologies. This leads to normalisation, and at the same time cancels the bias of viewing artificial life as something attached to a very narrow field. On the other hand there is *the* field, and we cannot distance ourselves from that because it is part of our lives. Added to this is the fact that many tools have been made more democratic as a result of movements like maker, open source, etc., facilitating the democratisation of resources related to robotics, simulation or algorithms, for example. This also leads us to focus more on content and less on technology: for example, it is no longer about creating a piece with robots. What types of robots are we talking about? What political or aesthetic problems are posed by these robots, what reflections do they elicit from us?

In the field of artistic research on artificial life, the close collaboration between art and science is shown in a very noticeable way. How would you describe this relationship?

I believe that art and science are two discrete entities. I strongly disagree with those who say that we are undergoing a new Renaissance period, with

Leonardos who move easily between science and art. Having completed a degree in a scientific discipline (namely, physics and chemistry), I know that what science tries to do as far as it possibly can is to simplify and predict behaviours. That is, it tries to find the formulas by which we can repeat and glimpse the characteristics of the natural, whatever the definition that may be given to the term. Art, by contrast, seeks ambivalence and ambiguity as a fundamental part of its poesis. Art does not want answers, but rather questions. Not that art and science are totally at odds with one another, but it is true that art looks for interruption, noise, silence, denial, stupidity, repetition or absurdity... all of these are fundamental concepts in good art that have no place in the sciences. The sciences, indeed, seek to reduce ambiguity. Taken as a whole, of course, there are points of intersection: for example, experimentation. There is no artist who is not empirical: we always want to see what happens, to try things and experiment, and in this we resemble scientists. Then, when it comes to establishing partnerships, science has strategies for channelling experimentation that I think are quite useful in art, because there is a methodology that it is necessary to learn in order to maintain a rigorous approach to the experimental. So, artists need to become more scientific in this methodological sense, and then scientists need to become more like artists in the sense of accepting uncertainty, which, furthermore, is a fundamental part of science. An approach of this kind can be useful for both parties.

Finally, how would you define artificial life?

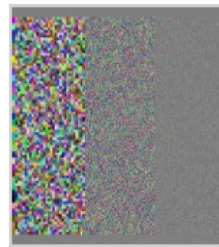
It is difficult to find a definition... I would say that artificial life is the recognition of our complicity with the inability of avoiding metonymy. We are aware that being ourselves is not something natural. Artificial life is the recognition of that consciousness, that there is nothing natural in being oneself.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Amodal Suspension, Relational Architecture 8", 2003. Shown here: Yamaguchi Center for Art and Media, Yamaguchi, Japan. Photo by: ArchiBiMing.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Pulse Room", 2006. Shown here: The Laboral Art Center, Gijon, Spain, 2007. Photo by: Antimodular Research.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Method Random 1", 2014. Image generated with a seed of 5970917 using an LCG algorithm with $a=22695477$, $c=1$, and $m=2^{32}$. Photo by: Antimodular Research.