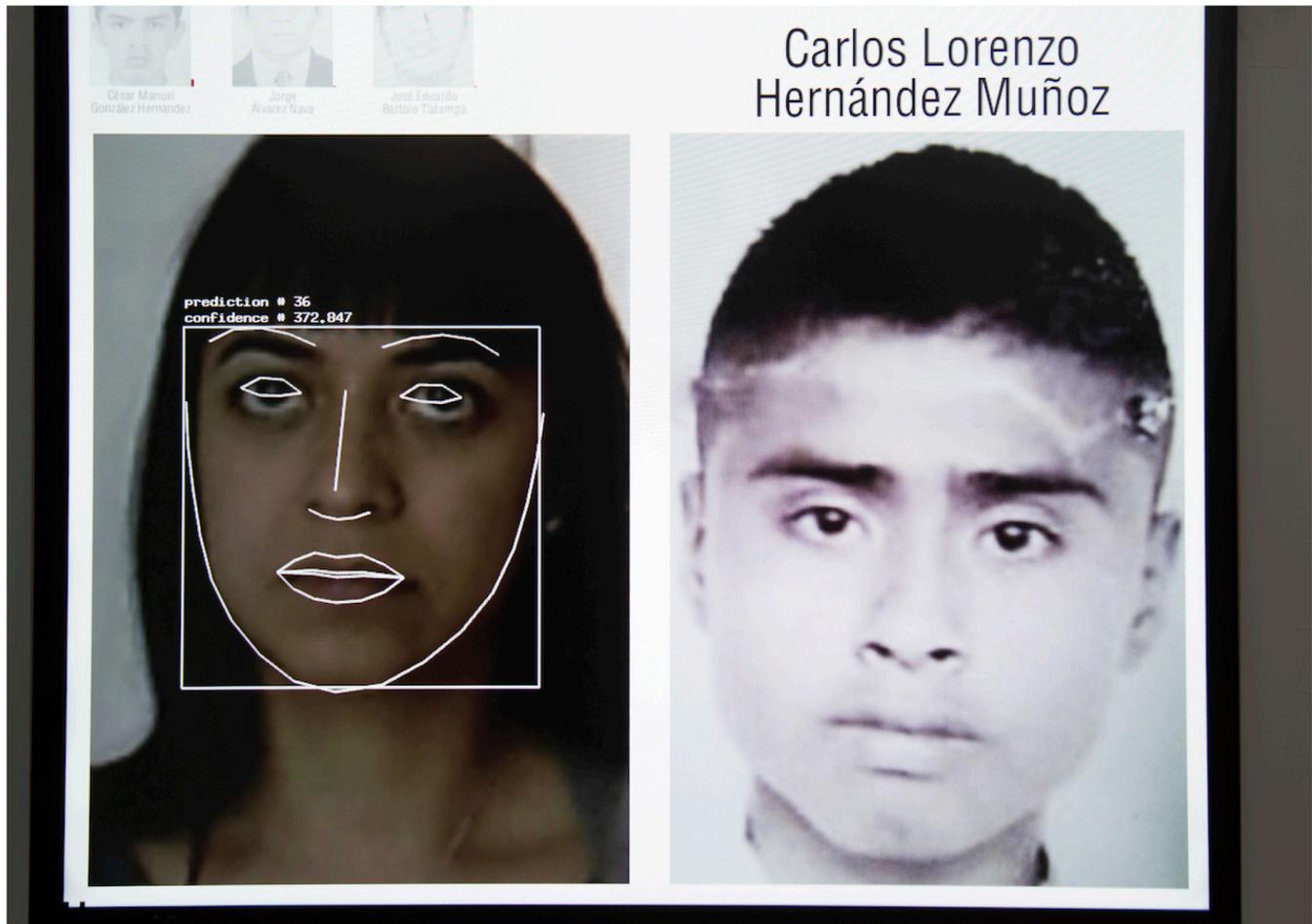


An Artwork Forces Us to Face Mexico's Disappeared Students

by [Julie Schwieter Collazo](#) on August 7, 2015



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Level of Confidence" (2015), face-recognition algorithms, computer, screen, webcam dimensions variable (image courtesy bitforms gallery, New York)

People who have the luxury of not being directly affected by the world's many injustices often feel fatigued by so much bad news. Unrelenting updates notifying us of senseless murders, police abuses, and other devastating stories have a blunt impact, testing the limits of our ability — and, if we're honest, our desire — to empathize and identify with victims. How much of others' pain can we absorb? Frequently, we are tempted to look away, especially if the injustice occurs elsewhere.

These ideas are at the root of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "Level of Confidence," a deceptively simple and powerful installation that's part of [Memory Burn](#), on view at [bitforms gallery](#). Lozano-Hemmer, a Mexican-Canadian artist, uploaded photos of the 43 students who "disappeared" from the rural Mexican teaching school in Ayotzinapa last September, and projected these on a vertical screen that

evokes, through size and shape, a mirror. A small camera attached to the screen scans the face of a gallery visitor, and processes it using facial recognition technology. Algorithms generate a “match” for the viewer, rendering the name and photo of the student whose facial features most closely resemble that of the viewer. A “level of confidence” — a percentage value indicating the closeness of the match — is also generated and presented on the screen.

For a process that takes one minute or less, the experience is unexpectedly intense. As the viewer stands in front of the work, his or her own face becomes visible on the screen, a schematic placed over it to outline the viewer’s jaw, nose, forehead, and eyes. Meanwhile, beside the viewer’s image, the program flips through the students’ pictures, as one possibility after another is considered and rejected until, finally, a match is made. Lozano-Hemmer told *Hyperallergic* he hopes that the effect is one that “creates an experience of kinship and responsibility with the students ... a condition of fraternal, biometric connection.”

It does. The minute of waiting is somber and uncomfortable — though it’s nothing, of course, compared to the 10 months that the students’ families have spent trying to determine the true fates of their loved ones. As the program scans for possibilities of a “match,” viewers find themselves comparing their images against those of the students, doing their own version of matching. “Do my cheekbones seem as high as his?” “Wow, my ears are *just* like his.” “Hmm. We have the same slightly sad expression in our eyes.” Suddenly, one notices that it’s possible to find some common aspect with any of the students, even the ones whose faces seemed, at first glance, to not resemble one’s own. The thought is disconcerting, of course, because it leads, inevitably, to this one: *What if I was one of the disappeared?* And with that, the news doesn’t seem quite so distant or impersonal.

“Level of Confidence” isn’t the first work in which Lozano-Hemmer explores violence against students in Mexico; in 2008, he installed “**Voz Alta,**” an interactive radio and light installation to memorialize the victims of the 1968 massacre of students in Tlatelolco, in Mexico City. Visitors to the installation spoke into a microphone, saying whatever they wished, and their voices were converted into light beams and FM radio signals broadcasted throughout the Mexican capital.

Facial recognition engine: Fisher, Eigen, LBPN Detected similarity score: 334.692 points
With the face of disappeared Ayotzinapa student: Alexander Mora Venancio
Level of confidence: 16 % Result:



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, “Level of Confidence” (2015) (image courtesy bitforms gallery, New York)

This idea of keeping the past present by engaging the spectator in the ongoing narrative of an event he or she might not even know about recurs occasionally throughout Lozano Hemmer’s body of work. In a 2013 [interview](#) with Maja Markovic, Lozano-Hemmer explained his art is driven by concepts related to “self-representation, intimacy, agency and the key idea that absence and presence are not opposites. The content of my work is often derived from participation, typically through technologies that are both violent and seductive...” These technologies often reach audiences that conventional news may not, and deliver and interpret the news in novel ways, mainly by insisting that we not simply forget about it and move on.

In “Level of Confidence,” Lozano-Hemmer also seems to explore anew a question that preoccupies so many artists: What is the relationship between art and activism? He told *Hyperallergic*, “My pieces are not protests”; however, he also believes that his work can contribute to — even help stimulate — conversations we need to have with one another about difficult, often uncomfortable subjects. “I live a privileged life,” he said, “and I am complicit with a sick economic and political system that generates economic violence, discrimination based on race, gender, and class, and massive environmental destruction. “But,” he added, “I am conscious that apart from the option of doing nothing, there exists the option of doing something from within this complicity.” A piece like “Level of Confidence,” he said, is a way to use the research he does in his studio, such as training the three facial algorithms used in the piece, to achieve those ends.

Another way is to ensure that the artwork has a life beyond the white walls and fixed dates of a formal exhibit. Lozano-Hemmer has created at least two new access points for “Level of Confidence” once *Memory Burns* comes down in mid-August. The first is by making the installation available for download so that it can, with the proper equipment, be shown in other non-profit venues. So far, the artist says, “Level of Confidence” has been shown at over 15 venues in eight countries. The second is by allowing other programmers to “fork open the source code” and apply the idea of “Level of Confidence” to other settings and situations. Lozano-Hemmer is already aware of two other places where this is being done: “Argentina, where the software will look for the disappeared during the dictatorship and in Canada, where it will look for the thousands of aboriginal women who have been reported missing in the past few years.”



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, "Level of Confidence" (2015)

(image courtesy bitforms gallery, New York)

This open-source approach — not just of making “Level of Confidence” available, but also of making it mutable and customizable — expands the consciousness-raising power of the piece exponentially. Imagine, for instance, using it to render images and matches for all of the Black Americans killed by police just this year alone. And, of course, making the software available to any institution with an interest in showing it means that the piece can be exhibited in places where Lozano-Hemmer himself might never have imagined — the names, faces, and stories of the disappeared students appearing in places where the news about them did not or where it failed to resonate.

“Level of Confidence” can also be acquired by art collectors; but here, too, Lozano-Hemmer upends the traditional artist-gallerist-collector relationship. The idea isn’t wholly original, but that’s not the point; it’s the insistence that at least some art must assume social roles and responsibilities, and not just serve an aesthetic function. If sold, the proceeds from the piece at bitforms, listed as one in an edition of 12, will be deposited in “a fund to help the affected community.” Priced at \$30,000, that amount is not insignificant. Lozano-Hemmer explains that the fund might, for example, provide scholarships for students at the teaching school attended by the 43 students who disappeared. The college did not charge students tuition, but it was defunded by the federal government after the disappearances. \$30,000 could be a lifeline for the college, which was founded in 1936. Money generated from the sale of “Level of Confidence” might also be used to support the children of the disappeared and to pay families’ legal fees.

September 26 will mark the one-year anniversary of the students’ disappearances. Lozano-Hemmer will have a new solo show at bitforms (opening, it’s worth noting, on September 16, Mexico’s Independence Day), and its works will move on thematically from the story that has gripped Mexico and, at least briefly, captured the interest of international media. As part of that media corps — I’ve covered the story since last November — I am grateful that “Level of Confidence” will continue to have resonance. At the same time, I’m sad that only art is keeping such concerns at the center of our consciousness.

Memory Burn continues at bitforms gallery (131 Allen St, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 16 .