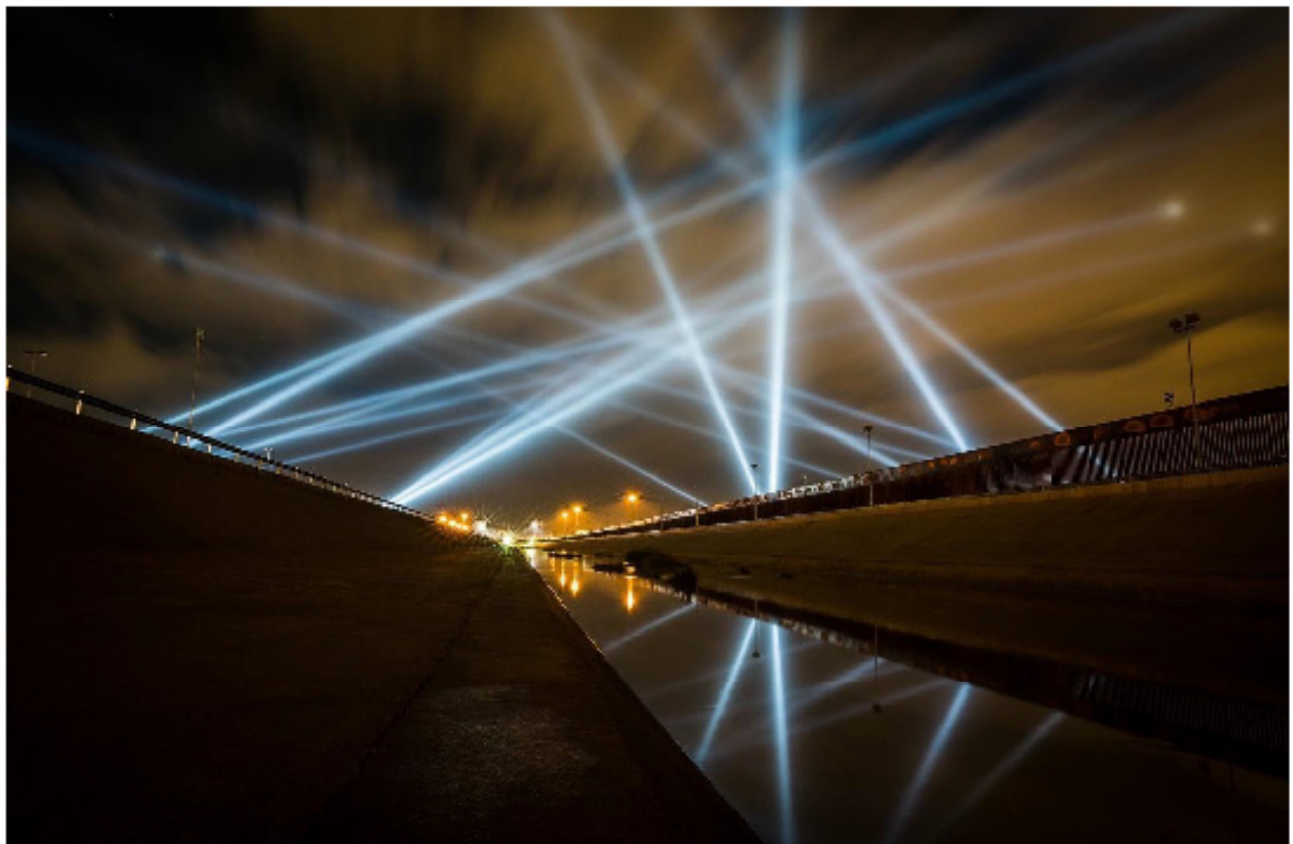


# Art in America

## RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER ON SEDUCTIVE PARTICIPATION AND THE OPPRESSION OF METRICS

By *Brian Droitcour*

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View of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Border Tuner / Sintonizador Fronterizo*, *Relational Architecture 23*, 2019, at Bowle High School, El Paso, Texas, and Chamizal Park, Ciudad Juárez, México. Photo Monica Lozano.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

Can an artist engage with [surveillance](https://www.artnews.com/t/surveillance/) technologies without being complicit in their use for control and oppression? Audiences tend to treat interactive works as a fun spectacle, a chance to take a selfie. So how do artists clarify their position? How do they present their work as commentary, rather than mere reproduction?

I posed this question to [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](https://www.artnews.com/t/rafael-lozano-hemmer/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/rafael-lozano-hemmer/>), whose installations make extensive use of motion sensors, facial recognition, and other tools for collecting biometric data. “Our contribution is to take this moment in history and make it tangible in some way,” he said. “But I have no doubt that I am complicit in what I denounce. I denounce a society of metrics. But I’m part of the problem. . . . I only hope that my use is perverting the original uses for which [these tools] were intended.” Our conversation took place on Zoom on June 3, and we were joined by writer and educator Dorothy R. Santos. I originally reached out to Lozano-Hemmer for *A.i.A.*’s series of Zoom talks featuring artists whose museum exhibitions were suspended due to Covid-19. His traveling survey “Unstable Presence” was supposed to open at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art at the end of April. Soon thereafter, as the pandemic continued its course and protesters took to the streets demanding justice for the black men and women murdered by police, it became clear how important Lozano-Hemmer’s exploration of public space and control is now. The air we breathe sensitizes us more acutely to the problems that he has always addressed in his work.

To wit: Lozano-Hemmer’s installation *Vicious Circular Breathing* (2013) is a transparent box wreathed with brown paper bags that inflate and deflate, recirculating the breath of viewers who step inside. All the viruses and bacteria remain trapped in the chamber. The work is always displayed with a warning regarding potential asphyxiation, contagion, and claustrophobic panic. Yet visitors line up to go inside anyway. A work that becomes more toxic as more people participate is Lozano-Hemmer’s comment on the sinister side of interaction, on the temptation to acquiesce to technological structures. Given the increased awareness of the dangers of breathing, viewers may be more likely to heed the warning, should the piece be installed elsewhere in the future. *Level of Confidence* (2015) uses facial recognition technology to measure the similarity of a viewer’s face to those of the forty-three students at a rural teachers’ college in Mexico who were kidnapped in 2014. The coldness of metrics clashes with the grim tragedy and the implicit request for empathy. Lozano-Hemmer has made the work open source, so universities and libraries can install it as they wish, but he has also editioned it, and put the money received for sales back into the communities from which the missing men come. It’s an example of how his work finds a place for care in critique.

Watch the full video here (<https://youtu.be/QgVdEmqmuEE>).