



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Vicious Circular Breathing, 2013, sealed glass prism with automated sliding-door system, motorized bellows, electromagnetic valve, sixty-one brown paper bags, custom circuitry, respiration tubing, sensors, computer. Installation view. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL

In 2007, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer became the first artist to represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale. Having won numerous awards and accolades from organizations such as Ars Electronica, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, and the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie in the 1990s and early 2000s, he has since become one of the leading “new-media artists,” with works in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This year alone, he will have five solo exhibitions and projects across three continents, the most important of which is this overdue selective survey in his adopted hometown of Montreal, cocurated by the Musée d’art Contemporain de Montréal and SFMOMA.

The show, titled “Unstable Presence,” opens with the hypnotic *Pulse Spiral*, 2008, an interactive light installation that collects individuals’ heart rates and converts them into the rhythmic twinkling of incandescent bulbs suspended in a darkened room. It is a chandelier version of the *Pulse Room* from two years prior, which was shown in Venice and later acquired by MAC Montréal; according to the artist, that work was inspired by a scene in the 1960 film *Macario*, by Mexican director Roberto Gavaldón, as well as by American Minimalist music and the cybernetic research undertaken at the Instituto Nacional de Cardiología in Mexico City. With its complex engineering, respect for the heritage of Latin America, references to historical art, mobilization of scientific theories, and aesthetic of the open system, *Pulse Room* has introduced key elements of the artist’s practice to audiences from Basel to Bogotá and from San Francisco to Sydney.

There is another dimension to Lozano-Hemmer’s work, however, that is better characterized by another project from 2008: *Voz Alta*, an installation commissioned by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma

de México to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the Tlatelolco student massacre. For two weeks, this anti-monument invited those passing through the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Mexico City to speak their minds into a megaphone; as the statements were amplified in the plaza, they were also transmitted via the university’s radio station and transformed into a sequence of flashes that traversed the city via a relay of four powerful searchlights. (In the exhibition, the work is represented by video footage and a working prototype of the megaphone.) While both *Pulse Spiral* and *Voz Alta* make poetic use of technology to aggregate individuals into a public—if pointedly precarious—collective, the latter’s explicit engagement with politics clarifies the object of Lozano-Hemmer’s work. That is, he aims to explore the ways in which information technologies have contributed—not only today, but since early modernism, as suggested by the use of radio—to the management (creation, manipulation, documentation, and erasure) of subjects, whose “presence” within those media is inherently “unstable,” as this exhibition’s title suggests.

Emphasizing the past decade of Lozano-Hemmer’s artistic production (from *Pulse Spiral* and *Voz Alta* onward) and eschewing chronology, the exhibition draws out this thread by focusing on instructive juxtapositions. For example, *Voz Alta*—a soapbox for a “loud voice”—is installed next to a cozy room containing *Voice Array*, 2011, which allows visitors to add their own sounds to a babbling brook of unintelligible noise that is rendered as an encircling band of brilliant white light. (The obfuscation of language and evanescence of breath are recurring themes, reflecting the artist’s fascination with both the capabilities and limits, and the uses and abuses, of media technologies.) In forgoing completeness, the survey is also able to foreground the unusual material and phenomenological diversity of Lozano-Hemmer’s works, in forms ranging from 3-D-printed aluminum sculptures to mists of water shaped by ultrasonic atomizers and gold nanopamphlets inhaled from the air. The informed, strategic, and expressive uses of these materials evidence his importance as an artist without qualification, as well as the possibilities of so-called new-media art within the context of art history and its white-walled museums.

—Tina Rivers Ryan