

Is it Big Brother? Is it art? What if it's both?

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My new smartphone recognizes me by my thumbprint. I felt a little uneasy activating that feature. Someday my biometric identifier may slip into a data environment I can't control.

We assign opportunities to mark and document our existence all the time, often without knowing it. Walk down a city street, and numerous security cameras record your movements. Go online, and an invisible swarm of trackers will record your interests, your location and much more.

We all know this, but most of us don't think about it much, perhaps because it happens so inconspicuously. Artists make it their business to point out the inconspicuous, which is why some see our surveillance environment as a rich field for works about power and the erosion of privacy.

At first glance, the huge new panel of 500 luminous screens overhanging the foyer of Montreal's Maison Manuvie shows no link to surveillance. The colours that sweep over it, however, come from data gleaned by a video camera scanning the glass-walled lobby on

busy Maisonneuve Boulevard. A processor selects from saturated colours in the camera's field of vision, and converts them into a rippling palette of tones. Particular sources are usually hard to spot, although a woman's bright red hat, passing by the camera during my recent visit, was soon followed by a fiery blaze across the whole installation.



The creator of *Colorimeter* is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a Mexican-born artist who lives in Montreal.
Miguel Legault/Antimodular

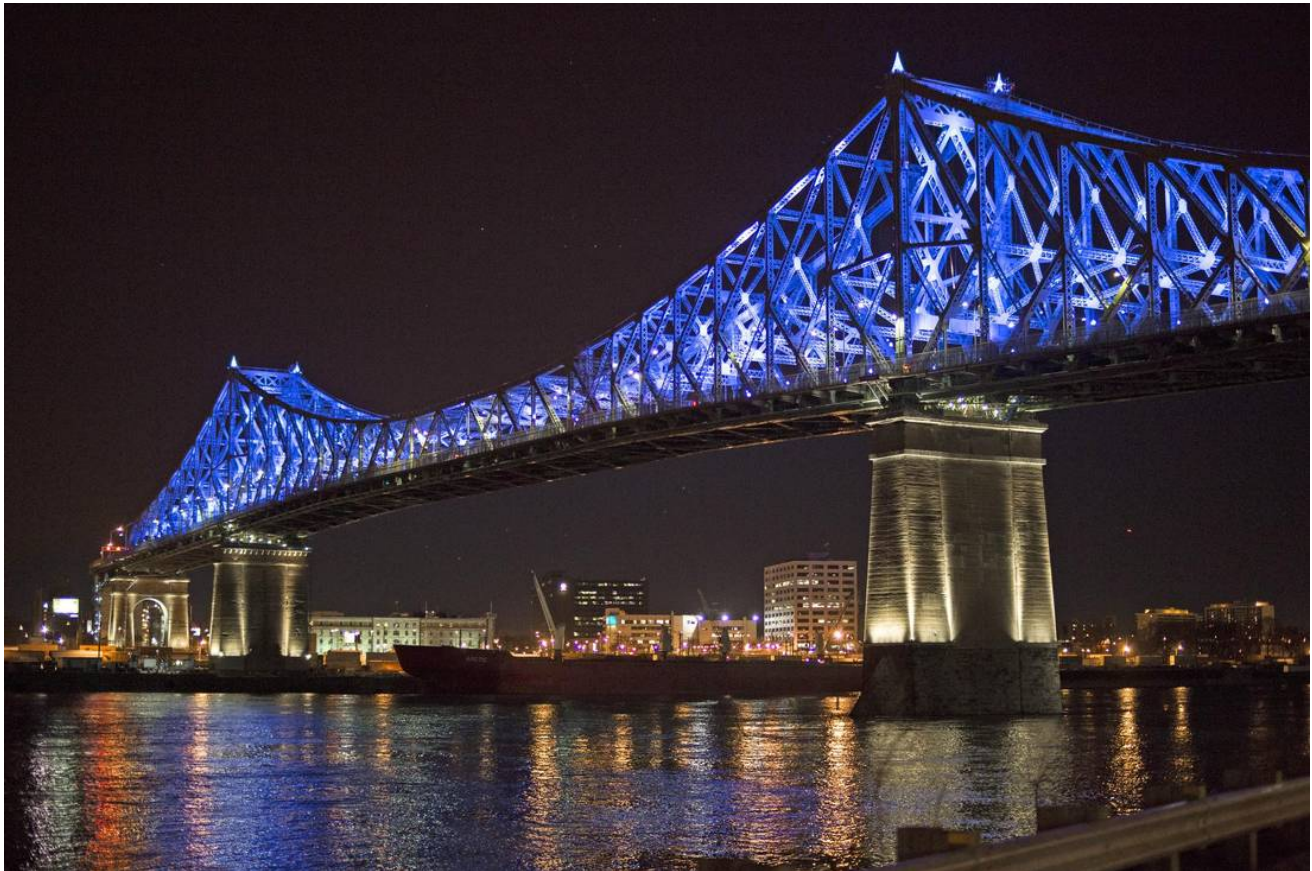
Colour may seem a benign focus of surveillance. But skin colour can be a potent identifier, when fed into security systems that oppress some populations in the name of protecting others.

The creator of this piece, titled *Colorimeter*, is Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a Mexican-born artist who lives in Montreal. He has made many works about the culture of surveillance, some more pointed than *Colorimeter*. *Surface Tension*, an installation on permanent display at Quebec City's Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, consists of a giant video image of a human eye, which opens when you approach and follows you as you move around the gallery.

Surface Tension singles you out for attention. *Colorimeter* does not, merging its data into an impersonal visual display. It's like the census, which strips away personal identifiers and focuses on aggregate results. *Colorimeter* is more about the co-presence of strangers in public – another big theme of Lozano-Hemmer's work – than about surveillance as such. Its

luxuriant colours may even make us welcome the system absorbing information about us, instead of questioning its right to do so.

Something similar could be said about *Living Connections*, the 10-year interactive lighting display that went live last spring on Montreal's Jacques Cartier Bridge. This \$39.5-million project is "connected in real-time to big data and social-media networks," according to Moment Factory, the Montreal design studio that led the project. Twitter posts on Montreal topics have an impact, as do news stories, weather and a nebulous factor identified as the "mood" of the city. Sensors track the passage of vehicles, bikes and pedestrians.



Living Connections is an interactive lighting display on Montreal's Jacques Cartier Bridge. The \$39.5-million project is 'connected in real-time to big data and social-media networks.'

Moment Factory

Living Connections is like a grandiose, next-generation version of a work by the Los Angeles art duo Electroland, who in 2008 installed an interactive lighting project in a pedestrian bridge at Indianapolis Airport. In Electroland's piece, called *Connections*, large light dots on the ceiling flash in varying colours as people pass under, often tracking individuals the whole way across, or making visual links between strangers approaching from opposite ends.

Both pieces take time-outs from interactivity. *Connections* regularly goes a bit wild, with all lights flashing to sounds from Chic's 1978 disco hit, *Le Freak*. Every half-hour, *Living*

Connections runs an 80-second programmed segment called *Champagne*, which Moment Factory says is "designed to create a joyful, sophisticated showcase of the bridge's programming potential."

There's one big difference between the two projects, apart from scale and technical sophistication. *Connections*, as with Lozano-Hammer's giant eye, wants you to see it watching you. *Living Connections*, as with *Colorimeter*, prefers that you feel yourself as part of the urban environment from which data are scooped to drive the show of colours on the bridge.

Living Connections doesn't seem to have penetrated the city's consciousness as much as was hoped, apart from days when fireworks are added. The bridge isn't as prominent in the cityscape as, say, Lions Gate is in Vancouver. Not many people on Twitter use the #illuminationMTL hashtag that ignites a spark of light on the bridge's exterior. Why would you, unless you were standing in front of it, preparing perhaps to take a selfie?

That's the flip side of surveillance culture: So many people are constantly recording their own presence and posting it on social media for all to see. The watchers watch us, we watch ourselves, and maybe someone is preparing to feed it all back to us as art.