



Canadian - Mexican artist Rafael Lozano Hemmer. Courtesy Rafael Lozano Hemmer

Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer talks about interactive exhibit on display at East Plaza on the Corniche

Anna Seaman January 6, 2015

During the last 10 days of Guggenheim Abu Dhabi's *Seeing Through Light* exhibition, an interactive artwork by the Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer will go on display at the East Plaza on Abu Dhabi's Corniche.

Pulse Corniche, which uses powerful robotic searchlights to cast patterns on the sky that can be seen from a distance of 15 kilometres, is a unique installation – that is controlled by visitors' heartbeats.

It was developed from an artwork that Lozano-Hemmer created in 2006 and was displayed at the Venice Biennale the following year. We caught up with the artist ahead of the launch.

This piece was developed in 2006. Have you made any major changes to it to suit the new environment?

In my first piece, titled *Pulse Room*, the heartbeat of participants controlled hundreds of incandescent light bulbs hanging from the ceiling of an old abandoned factory in the Mexican City of Puebla. It represented Mexico at the Biennale di Venezia 2007 and then travelled to several museums around the world.

[RLH]

I have developed many subsequent pieces where participants' heartbeats control theatrical lighting, ripple tanks, chandeliers and water hoses.

For *Pulse Corniche* I decided to work with powerful robotic searchlights. The lights' brightness and position will be entirely controlled by the pulse of participants, creating unique patterns in the sky.

Is it aimed at giving audience members the chance to connect with themselves?

For sure. One aim is to have public space be personalised by individual participants, to render tangible their most intimate biometrics.

Having said that, I don't make my art with a single goal or aspiration. Most often I work out of intuition and my approach is experimental, without planned or expected results in mind.

I don't know if people in Abu Dhabi will see the project as a chance to connect with themselves, or with others, or perhaps experience the piece as a connection to ominous biometric identification technologies that are becoming omnipresent.

As it is a group interaction and the light beams will be produced by many of us, are you attempting in a way to unite us, beyond our usual divisions of class, race and gender?

It is true that we all have similar, measurable electrical activity in our hearts. However, as a Mexican artist, I mistrust interpretations about artwork in terms of social aspirations.

It is a sad fact that in the name of "unity", privileged white men such as myself have created art that pretends that prejudice based on class, race and gender does not exist, or that it can be eradicated with a show. But certainly I do care for the project to have open, free access and be inclusive.

Personally, being an immigrant in Canada, I can imagine becoming emotional if we can get migrant workers to participate in the piece, as I think it is critical that they feel included in the city. But I am aware that this will be temporary, symbolic power.

Is it also supposed to point at our fragility at human beings and so, in that sense, cast a spiritual light on the experience?

I like the idea that the project may "point at our fragility as human beings". But the kind of fragility that I hope to underline is our fragility in front of a global economic, political and military environment that only represents the interests of less than 1 per cent of the population.

As you know, for more than 100 years biometric detection has been used to identify suspects, but now with automation, pattern recognition and widespread ubiquity of scanning devices, we are truly living in a society of control with an Orwellian reach.

Or take searchlights: they were used in the world wars for anti-aircraft

surveillance, Albert Speer arranged them for Nazi spectacles of power and intimidation, and today they are used to search for Mexican migrants at the US border or for the launch of a new shopping mall.

I believe the challenge for an artist using technologies with these backgrounds is to create projects that are critical and poetic, changing the way these technologies are used, but acknowledging our own complicity with what we denounce.

This art piece is part of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi exhibition, Seeing Through Light. What is your opinion on the importance of light as a medium?

All visual artists work with light, by definition, so I think that focusing on light as subject and object for the exhibition is a very good idea.

There are many artists I admire in the Seeing Through Light exhibition. Their approach to light is spiritual, perceptual and/or formal and they are the masters at that.

My own approach is inspired by the playful and carnivalesque light found in nightclubs, on the one hand, and on the other hand by the violent police light that blinds during an interrogation, by the predatory nature of helicopter searchlights looking for Mexicans at the US border, or by the violence of fusion explosions in our Sun.

What importance do you place on having your work in the public arena?

I'm very happy to make a work that extends the Guggenheim exhibition into public space. Often art and museums are seen as only for the elite – public art is one way to categorically insist that this does not need to be the case.

Do you hope for this to be a continuing project? Are you planning to take it anywhere else?

Yes, I will continue making pieces that react to people's heartbeat. For example, in March I am taking a small piece called Pulse Index to Art Dubai with my London gallery Carroll/Fletcher. It is a piece that records and exhibits the fingerprints of thousands of participants.

• Pulse Corniche will be at the East Plaza on Abu Dhabi's Corniche from tomorrow until January 17