

MONANISMS

PULSE ROOM

2006

RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER

Pulse Room translates pulse-rates into light. Hold the sensor and yours will join those of the other ninety-nine most recent participants, in a string of blinking incandescence.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: *Pulse Room* came out of a very, very small repetition of rhythms, in this case heart rhythms, and the kind of thing that I was thinking about is the music of minimalist composers like Steve Reich, Glenn Branca and Conlon Nancarrow. And the idea that repetition with small phase-shifts would generate something that was bigger than the individual repetitions was the fundamental inspiration behind this project, but you don't know what it's going to look like until you do it, and then we actually exaggerate a little bit the actual electrical activity, so that somebody who has very small systolic or diastolic activity, we exaggerate that so that at the level of seeing it, it looks very unique, so that each heart looks very personal or very different from every other.

Elizabeth Mead: But it's not so important to you that the viewer would understand the processes underneath it or the inspiration for it?

RLH: That's right. I've always believed that a good artwork needs to have multiple entry points, like a bunch of loose ends. Then some people will pick up on the medical science and the interest in biometrics, other people will be into a spiritual understanding of this. Like there's a movie from 1960 called *Macario*. It's a Mexican movie where the protagonist has a hunger-induced hallucination where he sees everybody who's alive represented by these little flickering candles in the cave. I thought, "That's really like *Pulse Room*". So some people are thinking *memento mori*. They're thinking about the fact that here are your vital signs and then after one hundred people participate, your vital signs disappear. I think it's very important to be open to how people use it and how they make their own story with it.

EM: So you don't have an ideal reaction in mind, an ideal point of engagement?

RLH: Not really. Sometimes I do. I made a piece for Cuba where people could type texts into a keyboard and these texts would immediately go onto the internet—because the internet is forbidden for Cubans, but it's legal for Mexicans and Canadians. Then I've created this piece of software which would ask fifty-five billion unique and different questions and from the point of view of the authorities it would be impossible to know if a question was asked by a computer or by a person.

[RLH]

So by doing that I was trying to conceal, or allow the possibility of camouflage, and then the impossibility of censorship.

So what I thought in that piece, what I was hoping, is that what we would get is a whole bunch of heavy, political statements or more personal statements about living in a situation like the Cubans do and interestingly what happened is there was very little of that. Most of it was sexual in nature, erotic. They were like, “Hey, I want to have you and ...” So I thought that was kind of great. I had an idea of what I was hoping to achieve and then people did whatever they thought, you know, and at the end I don’t have a monopoly over how the pieces are interpreted and I quite enjoyed those kind of mistakes in planning. Like, I like that. Why should they speak about this when what they want to talk about is sex? It’s fine.

EM: It’s not so much that the participation of the viewer is at the heart, as so much as their ownership, sort of taking an ownership role in your work?

RLH: I think it really depends on the piece. I have some pieces which are not interactive. I have pieces where interactivity is fundamental. *Pulse Room* is a piece where without participation it does not exist. So basically you’re surrounded by a dark room and there’s no recordings to show. So that’s the end of it. So really that particular approach I like to think of as a twist on the minimalist script. You know, like the minimalists used to say, “What you see is what you get”. What I’m saying now in some of these works is, “What you give is what you get”. So to see the work, you participate. You leave behind something and then you’re part of the work. So there’s a sense of—I’m trying to evoke a sense of agency in many of these works, a sense of self-representation, a sense of intimacy is very important. So I find that a lot of art, especially contemporary art, tries to be intimidating, and this intimidation—you know, I quite like some intimidation in art—but this intimidation also leads, oftentimes, to a certain alienation.

Like just too much art is just based on shock or it’s based on certain, very adversarial roles towards the public or the art establishment and I find that kind of tedious. I find that it’s really important to have a much more open relationship with the public, to understand that the public has a lot to offer, that one should not have a condescending and paternalistic attitude to them.

EM: That seems to be about the space, and particularly about public space. I’m just wondering how that is different—so at *Mona*,

Pulse Room is in a museum, as opposed to something like the big sun here [*Solar Equation*, Federation Square, Melbourne]. Like, how is that different?

RLH: It’s completely different. Some of the main differences have to do with the intermediation, right? So for the longest time I was just doing ephemeral interventions like *Solar Equation*, so pieces in public space, and that very much was done against what I would call a vampiric and necrophiliac desire to collect art and keep it in museums for posterity. For a really long time I spoke against this, and then I started working with galleries and museums started buying my work, and so I changed my tune.

EM: Changed your tune for strategic reasons?

RLH: No. I did literally change my conceptual view because—here is what I want. What I want is that in both cases, be it public space or being in a museum, the piece is being performed, but it’s not being preserved. So the idea is—the difference that I always make is between preservation, which is what the museum seeks to do oftentimes, versus perpetration of the cultural act. So what I’m interested in is the idea that these works remain alive. Do you remember in the eighties there was that statement from Douglas Crimp that the museum was a mausoleum, that the artworks would go to museum to die? Well I think that what’s happening today is the exact opposite. Museums are vampiric. They keep artworks alive through restoration and quotation and through, you know, conservation programs and so on, and the artworks are not being allowed to have an honourable death.

So this vampiric and necrophilic desire is of course linked to what we see, as a culture, as being representative and as being worth preserving. So I find a lot of problems with those concepts: collections that pretend to be exhaustive and rely on historicist, didactic, pedagogical and condescending presentations. I believe that artworks are alive, right, they are aware, of the public, for instance. And artworks now are listening to us and they’re sensing us and they’re looking at us and they’re hoping that we will do something that will inspire them. So the museums that now I’m interested in, perhaps like *Mona*, are interested in mixing different pieces, different media, different eras, different styles, different politics to create a performative platform for the piece to be able to

continue making its performance. So you see these are the two distinctions—the distinction between about it being alive and it being kept unchanging. The artwork needs to age. It needs to live.

If you go to a museum, say a museum of anthropology and you look at all of these different objects, for instance totem poles or dress or altars, they had a performative role for a culture, right? And when that culture dies, the artefacts end up in a museum and they're preserved and restored and maintained forever, right, decontextualised from the performers. That's what I'm talking about. So, on the subject for instance of interactive art, it is not the situation of, say, an abstract expressionist painting where you want it to always be presented in that context. Rothko, for instance, was very specific about how he wanted his paintings shown, you know, because he wanted to ensure that future generations would get this universal message of aesthetics that he was pursuing in style. I'm completely different from that.

I believe that the future curator needs to have the power to reinterpret the work and to represent it with the means and the objectives of future agendas. So there is a very, almost liberating thing to be able to say, "You know what? This work needs to continue performing in the way that I can't even specify into the future". When I sell a work, I give very specific descriptions about what— You know, here's a very typical question in media art, right? Say you had Nam June Paik, the sitting Buddha looking at himself in the video screen, right? Well, the monitor that is being used and the Buddha observing himself in the video is CRT, cathode ray tube, which soon, maybe ten years, maybe thirty, will fail and it will disappear. And the question is, the question that we needed to have asked Nam June Paik is, "When that cathode ray tube cannot be restored any further, is the piece finished and dead? Or would you accept for us to replace it with a flat screen, for instance?" And many of Nam June Paik's works were about the TV cabinet. So in many of them that would not work at all, like the cabinet is fundamental to the artwork. But perhaps in the Buddha, maybe he might have said "yes", and the reason is because maybe the Buddha is more about the circularity of observation. It's not about that cabinet. The only one who could have answered that question would have been Nam June Paik.

So with that example in mind, I try and think, "Ok, well what

happens to this artwork in ten years, in fifty years? How can we keep this piece performing?" and one of the things that I've said about *Pulse Room* is, this is not a piece which can migrate to a different kind of light source. It has to be an incandescent light bulb. Why? Because I am married to the tungsten filament, I'm married to the kind of light that it gives, I'm married to the icon of the light bulb. If you can't get that, the piece dies.

EM: So we're talking obviously about the fact that incandescent light bulbs are now illegal in Australia.

RLH: They're illegal, yep, and in most of the world.

EM: And in *Pulse Room*, that's the light source that you use, and we have to import them from China. Are you being a cultural vampire by doing that?

RLH: No, no, no. There are some works, like for instance the tape-recorder work called *Subtitled Public* which is very different to *Pulse Room*. *Subtitled Public* is a project where any number of projectors project onto the bodies of people, these words which you can't get rid of. The only way to get rid of them is if you touch somebody else and then you have to change words with them. I gave them four projectors when they bought it and they were like, "You're only giving us four. What happens when these projectors die?" It's like, "You buy new projectors with new resolution and my software automatically bolds the projector and uses that future resolution that you will have and instead of a very pixelated, you'll have a better quality image". So the project in *Subtitled Public* is really in the instructions. That's the fundamental thing. How you actually achieve it is completely unimportant.

Not in *Pulse Room*. In *Pulse Room* I'm saying, "No guys, you're not going to put compact fluorescents. You're not going to put HIDs. You need to have incandescents". So I've asked my collectors to consider that, and obviously you guys have and you purchased a whole bunch of them so you've stockpiled which is a really honourable way of doing it. The other way—and these are not mutually exclusive—the other way to do it is, I believe that incandescent light bulbs are banned only because they're inefficient. You need a lot of power to create very little energy. So that's why they're banned. But it's not like a Dan Flavin. Dan Flavin, his neons, I mean they're literally toxic, right? So there's no way you can remake some of those. I've always believed that in the future there would be an artisanal production of, you know,

basically like a vacuum tube with like a tungsten filament, inner gas, and you close it. It's been manufactured for 150 years. So I always thought there'd be an artisanal production.

I have just approved the new General Electric incandescent light bulbs that came out. What they've done is, they've taken the pear-shaped bulb and they've replaced the tungsten filament with a tiny halogen incandescent, because halogens are not banned, because you need very little power to generate a lot of light. So then I've looked at it and I've tested to see how it performs with pulses and whatever, and it's pretty good. So now a new solution comes out that respects my needs for that aesthetic to be able to keep it performing. But I believe, like, if you can't do that then the piece should die.

EM: I know that your work is in no way about the environment, but it raises an interesting question about—I think the issue of the political and social responsibility of the artist seems to be quite important to Australian viewers. You're talking about your light bulbs. Because they're not using a lot of energy, it's a different situation. But say for the sake of argument that you wanted to do something that really would have an environmental impact and was considered to be, like, morally wrong by some people's standards, would you go ahead and do it anyway for the purposes of conserving the integrity of your art?

RLH: Yeah, I would. Yeah I would. It depends what you're talking about. Like for instance, I have a piece which uses two hundred and fifty thousand watts of power. So for instance what I would be against is—that piece may actually become permanent in Singapore, and what I would be against is for it to be turned on all the time. I think it needs to have a schedule and it needs to be turned on respectfully to the environment. Oftentimes when my work uses a lot of power, I ask or demand that the presenter actually offsets the carbon emissions. So you don't spend that much money on it, but like you spend some money for reforestation, carbon sequestration and whatever. At least it makes you feel you have a little bit of better karma.

But ultimately what I'm interested in doing is also understanding that our usage of electricity is completely hypocritical. I mean in Vancouver I was using this two hundred and fifty thousand watts of power and they said that my piece was "environmental September II" and I did my research and I found that two hundred and fifty thousand watts is one tenth of what a typical hockey game uses.

I think that one always has the responsibility to look at the most energy efficient ways to proceed, but certainly I have no problem in spending a lot of power.

EM: You're comparing that to a hockey game which is, in effect, another form of entertainment. If you compared it to something like so-called basic human needs, entertainment's never considered to be a basic fundamental human need is it?

RLH: But this is what I'm thinking—ok, so if we're in a situation where the basic human need has come to the point where we need to shut down hockey games then yeah, ok shut down my work too, clearly. But it matters to me where we put, as a society, our emphasis. I think that it's interesting that when we talk about an elite in sport, we are very excited to give all this money. Like it just recently happened in Australia to have these centres of excellence where the athletes are going to become the best in the world, right, elite? But when you talk about elite in culture, it's like that sounds really bad. It sounds like alienating and undemocratic and whatever, but it's not. I mean it's like you need to concentrate on the artworks that you think will motivate people to reflect about their condition and I think there's nothing wrong in thinking that some art is better than other art and that it requires a certain kind of support, and in this case electrical power.

EM: Do you see yourself as having a responsibility as an artist? What you're saying is that some art is more valuable than others because it has a function of compelling people to reflect on their condition, for whatever that means. Does that go to the heart of your objectives?

RLH: It depends on which piece. Broadly speaking my work really cares about the public, and what that means is that my work is not hermetic, that my work is eclectic always. I'm always paying attention to who is my public and in doing so, I am very aware of politics. I'm very aware of the economy, the environment, of the context in which these works get presented because ultimately, as I was saying before, if the piece is a platform for participation or for the self-representation of the people, then that piece necessarily needs to be in tune with social issues, political issues. They're inevitable, they're part of the work. So many times there is a social conscience. I tried my very best and often I succeed in not being moralistic. Not moralising about possible solutions

or something like that. I don't think that art is meant to provide those solutions. Art is meant to problematise and criticise and ask questions. Like open up the discussion in ways that perhaps are not rational or logical. I think that art works in the wonderful field of the absurd and of ambivalence and ambiguity and uncertainty and when art puts into question certain things, it activates all of society to think differently about where they're at. I think that it sounds really pretentious, but I think that art really does have a role of shit-disturbing, of disorganising, or re-prioritising stuff and questioning and that that role is actually a really fundamental role for society, because otherwise we would just all be sort of walking the line.

EM: And work that fulfils that function can justify greater energy consumption? I think you should come up with a formula ...

RLH: Yeah, it's like, ok, so if society asks this many questions out of seeing this, then we can use double the power [laughs].

EM: I just want to ask about your team and your working process. You seem more of a director than an artist. Are the days of solitary artistic production over?

RLH: Not for me, anyway. I mean I do do solitary work. I just did a sculpture at the studio and I was really excited that I didn't need anybody to do it. But it's true that I work in teams, that even if you're working alone today, you are very aware as an artist that you are working in collaboration. Even the great masters, not just because they had their ateliers and all of these people, but as you're working with new tools or with canvas makers or with pigment makers, you're collaborating with what's existing or you're collaborating with materials, for instance. Materials call for certain properties and you react to that.

In software it's very easy to understand that everything is collaborative because if you sit in front of Photoshop, you are collaborating with a bunch of decisions that were made by a team of software engineers. I like what you said about director. I very much feel that my role is the director, as in the performing arts, and then there is a writer and an actor and a composer and a photographer. I mean, everybody who is part of the team has a role to play, but ultimately we need to follow one vision. Because ultimately you're acting out of—your

reasons for doing something are not really understood. I think it has to be intuitive, it has to be unknown, it has to come out of hormones and moods and nightmares and perversions. No-one should be all, "Wouldn't be better if like ..." "No, shut up. This is my nightmare". I'm also immensely insecure. So working in relationships allows me to move ahead with my idiosyncrasies and biases.

EM: What are you insecure about?

RLH: I'm insecure about just about everything. I'm insecure about, well, the way that I spend my time. I'm insecure about the way I'm complicit with what I denounce. I'm insecure about—what else am I insecure about? Yeah, I think time and complicity. Those are the two.

EM: That you're not contributing enough with how you use your time?

RLH: Yeah, or that I'm not—yeah, just really aware of the passage of time and the process of ageing and the process of learning, and I'm immensely ambitious with my time and I just feel like, yeah, like I'm not making a contribution, or like I'm not kicking arse. And it comes from just this sort of a family background. I mean I come from nightclub owners and they always had a very specific way of looking at the world which I love and I enjoy which is very in the moment and whatever. But also I'm really ambitious about being prolific, for instance. Only now am I being prolific, and before it was driving me nuts not to be able to produce more work.

EM: Why?

RLH: It's like an excretion. It's like this mental thing that you just have to—it's almost as if you're so insecure that you're sort of satisfying this really psychotherapeutic need to expel and expose and exhibit, and a compulsion to project, and then sort of hide yourself inside of that work. I hate to say it, it's an extremely unsophisticated psychotherapeutical situation, but it's what happens to me. So I really care. I really care that the work to some extent be experienced and be performed.

EM: Would you say you are more insecure about the compulsion to produce as opposed to actually being liked and people getting something out of it?

RLH: I don't care about being liked. I mean, I care about being liked of course, but it's not so much that. The insecurity is— What I'm saying about the complicity with what I denounce is, that very condition that I make works that oftentimes have this—at least internally, I never project them—but internally, they have these objectives that I think are valid or valuable. Then in the end they end up being, you know, these chips that are used by rich, powerful collectors, many of whom I detest, for amassing wealth, and I find that really problematic. I am most definitely involved in the world that I am seeking to criticise and I understand that it's not easy to be separate from it, but at the same time I'm immensely insecure about that. I did a project recently for a multimillionaire Russian magnate and it just doesn't feel right. Like as I sit there having Bellinis with 1968 Dom Perignon. It just feels so empty and they make me very insecure about what are the modes with which an artist can actually support him- or herself with pride and integrity in a context which is culture at large, which is market-driven and you know, complicit. I mean, I think this is not just my problem. I think this is everybody's problem.

EM: Well any culture industry is, you know—complicity is the core of it. So I suppose all you can do is sort of make visible that complicity, and the contradiction?

RLH: Yeah, and talk about it. But a lot of the artists that I admire have completely separated themselves from the market. There's Jochen Gerz for instance, who always saw the gallery world, the commercial gallery world, for what it was, and stayed away from it, and continued his very socially critical practice, and I really admire that. So there's a lot of artists in North America do it through academia. So they join schools to be able to support themselves and not have that need inform their work. Whereas in my case, I mean I'm running a studio with, like, eight full-time people. We need to generate income because, you know, these people have mortgages, and I really care about the sustainability of the platform. So I've become, as you said, a director, but also a manager. I think about budgets a lot and I think about how to generate money to then keep on creating, because a lot of what I'm doing is self-produced. So I generate the money and then I invest my own money into making a particular experiment or risk, taking a particular risk. So for me I have to think about money. I have to think about how to do it and it's always a really difficult negotiation.

EM: In theory, would you aim for a complete separation between your practice and the market?

RLH: Yeah. I think that would be Utopia. I don't think that that's possible and I don't think that there's any example in the history of art that has managed to do that. I think that the best I can do is what you said before, is just acknowledge that complicity and underline a discomfort with it and once in a while, you know, call people's bluff, because you're on no-one's payroll. In Mexico the role of the artist, I like it a lot. There's a sense of independence and autonomy because you're not aligned. You're supposed to be able to speak your mind. So oftentimes in Mexico I've been invited, for instance, to programs or to interviews or to panels where we're not talking about art at all. They just want to have an artist there because they want to know the opinion of someone who is not part of their apparatus. I find that really romantic. I think artists are always part of the apparatus, but there is some truth to the fact that we're a little bit less than others.

EM: Yeah. I do think it's a myth that you know, that we have to resolve contradiction and hypocrisy. I think that—to be dramatic about it, like, the human condition is about hypocrisy and contradiction. So we kind of—I don't know. In Australia it manifests in politics. Like you can't—it's political death if you go back on something that you said previously or you change your mind about something.

RLH: I like that because I think that that's—we only have one life so we might as well be honest about what's happening. I think that the hypocrisy, especially in the artworld—well actually no, everywhere, it's not just our world, like you said. In politics, the whole notion that you change your mind is heroic, in my opinion. It's like, "Oh ok. You know what? I looked at that and that did not work out. We're going to try something else".

—Interview, 3 June 2010



