Canadian artist hits the switch in Trafalgar

Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer hopes his extraordinary light show will make strangers talk to each other

By Elizabeth Renzetti

Lozano-Hemmer says with a laugh. “I’m going to go throw some iPods at it.” Then he looks up at the sky. Britain is, famously, one of the most spied-upon nations on earth, with 4.2 million security cameras spread around the country. In Trafalgar Square and its surrounding streets, they are everywhere, attached to buildings and traffic lights and lampposts, so commonplace they blend into the background.

Lozano-Hemmer has long been fascinated with the technology of surveillance culture, and Under Scan is a way to subvert the relationship between the watcher and the subject. It’s a vast project, two years in the making, employing a thousand volunteers and funding from U.K. and Canadian sources. Let’s not forget the two ultra-bright projectors, each emitting a press release says, “$10,000 lumens of light.” Which is apparently a lot.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is in Trafalgar Square, cursing the skies. Not literally, you understand. The Mexican-Canadian artist is too jovial and unfailingly for that. But he’d like a bit of co-operation on the precipitation front, as he’s trying to install his giant interactive light show, Under Scan, in one of the world’s most famous public squares.

“Man, do you think we could get some Mexican weather for a while?” he asks, turning his Buddy Holly glasses to the sky, which remains a steadfast shade of London drab. It’s just stopped raining after pouring for two days, and it’s put his team of engineers behind schedule.

Under Scan essentially involves passersby triggering, and interacting with videos of people that will be projected on the square’s pavement. That requires two of the world’s most powerful projectors to flood the square with light, and the crane meant to hoist one of those projectors is whining and tilting and refusing to rise. Maybe it needs some Viagra.

“It needs machine Viagra!”

The projection fades when the viewer walks away, and then he can go on to trigger another.

What Lozano-Hemmer hopes is that Joe Pedestrian, instead of scurrying across Trafalgar Square in search of a beer or a bus, actually slows down, stops, begins playing with people projected on the pavement and perhaps even talking to the guy standing next to him. That’s what happened in Nottingham and Leicester, where Under Scan was previously installed. (It was commissioned by a regional U.K. government.) Children, in particular, shrieked in delight as their shadows caused people to pop up in unexpected places. “I don’t want to get all United Colours of Benetton,” Lozano-Hemmer says, “but what we’ve already seen with this piece is that people who don’t know each other will turn around and start talking to each other.

“I’ve always defended this romantic element of making people occupy the streets rather than shopping. This idea that it is radical to be in space and not just go home or to work, but to occupy it and make it yours.” Even during its installation, the bright lights and malfunctioning crane have drawn a crowd, while in the midst Lozano-Hemmer calmly makes suggestions to his crew. If anyone can distract the hordes of snap-happy tourists and bustling office workers, it’s this 40-year-old Concordia University chemistry grad, who’s now a whiz at merging technology and art in dazzling public displays. He’s been working on Under Scan for the past few years among museums and collectors for his media art, and from local government who want a crowd-pleasing installation that catches the eye while making the mind click over.

The 1.8 million visitors who experienced his Pulse Front at the 2007 Luminaire Festival in Toronto will remember this. He invited them to place their hands on a console and have that pulse translated, Zeus-like, in lights across the sky.

The idea for Pulse Front came from listening to a sonogram of his then unborn twins’ heartbeats (he and his wife also have another daughter, 4). He laughs: “a bit cheesy, I know.” These so-called “pulse works” have become a signature. There’s another, Pulse Bank, at the Haunch of Venison gallery in London. In a small room at the top of the gallery, participants put a finger into a tube suspended in water. Each person’s pulse registers as an electronic thump and as a wave in the water, which casts shadows on the wall – the more participants, the more intricate the pattern. It’s impossible not to talk to the person next to you when your heartbeat are pounding together like weird Euro disco.

Lozano-Hemmer develops these projects, along with a team of 15 software engineers, in a studio in Montreal, where he went to school and where his wife’s family is based. The Canadian government is terrific at helping out with research and development grants, but until Lumino, he’d never had a piece installed in the country he’s called home since he emigrated from Mexico at age 17. “I was very unhappy,” he says. “I thought, ‘Why? Why do I get Canadian Council grants to go to Japan and Holland, but I don’t do anything here?’ Part of the problem was that everyone who approached him wanted to slap a giant corporate logo on his work. “I’ve always said, ‘Sorry, you’re working in a public space, you’re establishing a relationship of trust. The moment you flash a logo, people see it as a crass advertisement, an imposition, rather than a gift.’”

Felix, the sponsor of Lumino, was alone in understanding that, he says.

While the vehicle of his work is state-of-the-art technology and computer software, Lozano-Hemmer bridles at the term “new media” as a label for himself as part of an artistic line stretching from Spanish painter Diego Velázquez in the 17th century through the French tradition of son-éclairage shows to American minimalist Dan Flavin’s fluorescent light tubes, but the importance of the wired world to our lives can’t be discounted, and it’s the artist’s job to wrestle with that.

“I always defend it as a very Canadian lesson. McLuhan’s idea of technology as your second skin preaches us being outside it, and observing. This is not a tool, it’s a language, and we can’t think about what it would be like before that language. Pol Pot tried that, and it didn’t go so well.”
It's not raining in Trafalgar Square but the wind is up, and the crane, though it's risen slightly, is still wobbling precariously. "I hope it doesn't fall over and take out the National Gallery," Lozano-Hemmer says. A guy with two gold teeth approaches and asks what's up. The artist explains that, in a couple days, he'll be able to walk through the square and find people dancing in his shadow. "Oh," says the man, as if he hears this every day. "You're raising the dead."

> Under Scan can be viewed in London's Trafalgar Square until Nov. 23.
> (www.threecitiescreate.org.uk/EMDA_Cultural_Quarters).