

INSIDE ARTS Q&A

Special effects

Mexican-Canadian electronic artist mixes media but calls on the community to bring his work to life.

BY ALICIA ANSTEAD



RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER IS AN ELECTRONIC ARTIST who uses robotics, projections, sound, cell phones, sensors and other technologies to develop large-scale interactive installations in public spaces. As clinical as his materials might sound, his most recent piece in the U.S. — *Pulse Park* at Madison Square Park last November in New York City — recorded the heartbeats of participants and beamed them into a light show on a large scrim. His inspiration? The syncopation of heartbeats he heard when his wife was pregnant with twins. “Just about every piece I’ve ever made is a progression,” he says. “It’s not *progress*. It’s a *progression*

from experiments from the past. I’m not concerned with whether what I’m doing is new. I work with technology not because it’s original, but because it’s inevitable.” Born in Mexico and trained as a chemist at Concordia University in Canada, Lozano-Hemmer lives audaciously in the vocabulary of both science and art, comfortably navigating between the cerebral world of philosophy and the populist power of the village square. Both sides show up in the following excerpts from an *Inside Arts* interview that took place by phone last November in preparation for Lozano-Hemmer’s appearance at the APAP Conference NYC 2009.

How does your artwork dovetail with a conference on the performing arts?

My work is closer to the performing arts than to visual arts because all of my works are activated by the public. Almost all of my work is interactive, which means the public is an integral part of my artwork. Artworks are created at the moment where people are performing them. If we underline this performative aspect of the artwork, it dovetails quite nicely into established understanding of what performance is, be it a concert, an art event or a party.

So do you believe that if a tree falls in a forest and there's no one there, it doesn't make any noise?

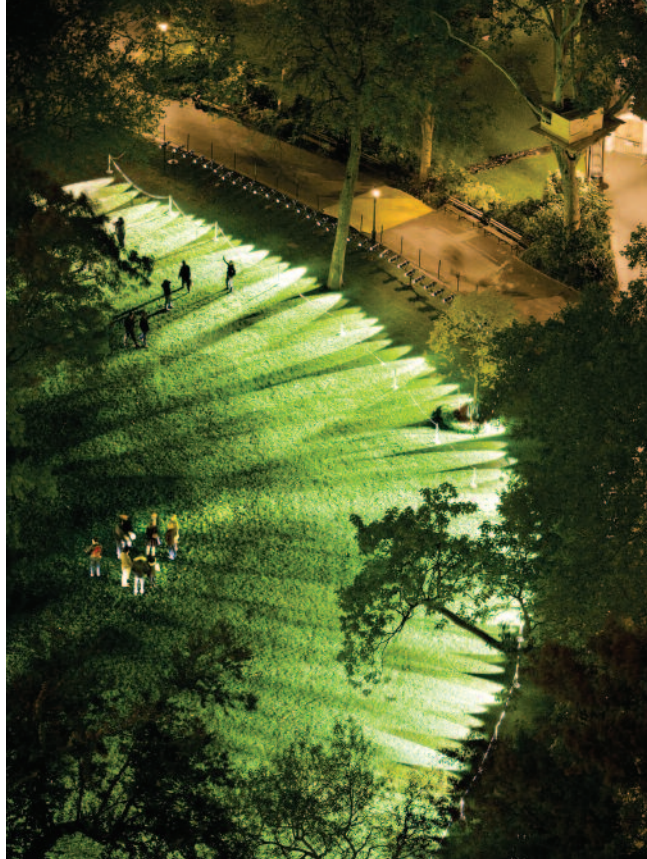
I believe we just don't know because we're not there. What I try to ensure is that my work is radically empiricist. I care about not just making the work for my own enjoyment. I am very much always thinking about who my public will be, how they will get to take over the work and populate it and make it their own. Often I speak about my work as platforms and stages that people will enter. Everybody is aware of the artificiality, and yet they playact and take part in it. I'm often thinking about my work in terms of Brechtian simulation — the idea that you're being complicit with what you're describing or representing or denouncing. At a certain point, you stop the show when you realize how it is you yourself are in relationship to a power struggle or poem or love or any of the issues an artist might want to address in the piece.

Does that require self-awareness in our relationship to art?

It's an understanding that the art experience is, by definition, incomplete. It's a passionate embracing of poetry as an ambiguity, as a metaphor, of a plurality of readings. The idea is that rather than trying to constrain interpretation or limit experience, we're seeking out platforms for people to then make their own stories. These stories are not prescriptive, nor are they a preprogrammed or preconceived idea of what the outcome will be. Rather, out of the situation different behaviors will emerge, which should, if the piece is good, surprise even the designer.

I am struck by your idea that pieces listen to us, wait for us to inspire them. It reminded me of magical realism in fiction. Is there something magical in your approach?

Because I am Latin American, I try to get some distance from the word "magic." I've read as much magical



Pulse Park (Madison Square Park, New York City, 2008)

realism as any other Latin American. I'm coming more from the understanding of my work as special effects. I'm very comfortable when people see my work, and they don't necessarily think of it as art. They just say it's special effects. That's fine with me. Effectism is

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something I embrace as an aesthetic and political state or attitude. I don't like gratuitousness in special effects. It seems like magic, but I always go out of my way to show the tracking systems, the surveillance equipment, the machinery behind the scenes, because that's the Brechtian moment.

You've talked about theater artists and literary artists. Are there visual artists who have influenced you?

I work in a field that sadly calls itself "new media." I am very much against this term because I find that, first of all, nothing of what we're doing is necessarily new. I'm always much more invigorated by finding precedence to what I'm doing and relationships to experimental art of the past. I'm very influenced by those people who have worked with lighting as their main source of plasticity. People like Thomas Wilfred, a Danish American lighting engineer from the 1920s. And all the other artists who have worked with lights, like Dan Flavin and Abraham Palatnik. Anybody who thought of light in itself as a medium for expression is fascinating to me.

What about Vermeer?

Sure. To go further back, I'm attracted to every painter using anamorphosis, trompe l'oeil and techniques of perceptual deceit.

You talk about working on a radio piece. What's that about?

I just did what I consider one of my most important works, not because the work itself was important, but because of the way it was received. It was a commission for creating a memorial for the massacre of 300 students in the plaza at Tlatelolco in the north of Mexico in 1968. For the past 40 years, it has been a taboo subject. The university commissioned me to make an artwork to remember this massacre. It was basically a garden-variety protest megaphone placed in the plaza where the massacre took place, and for a period of weeks anyone was welcome to come up and speak into it. There was also a 10,000-watt searchlight, which beamed a potent ray of light flashing in intensity as each person spoke. It would hit the nearby ministry of foreign affairs, and three more rays of light took the voice all over Mexico City. So if you were driving down the street, you'd see beams of light flashing and you could tune to [the radio] and listen live. It was an experiment in expression uncensored, unmoderated. It was a way to amplify the voices of the community on an urban scale and visualize those voices over the city. But more importantly, it was a platform people took over.

Your background is in science. How did you become an artist?

My family was always around arts. My mom had a gallery, and my parents were nightclub owners, so they were always friendly with musicians. I studied chemistry. The problem with chemistry and science in general is that it can be intensely experimental and intensely creative. But you need a doctorate or post-doctorate to get a lab and start creating. I hung out with the wrong people and started doing radio art and performing. I decided to stay in the arts.



Many people see a division between art and science. What's your position?

If I'm speaking to people who think we're in a renaissance, and



Voz Alta (Tlatelolco Memorial, Mexico City, 2008)



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Leonardo is back in our generation, and art and science can mix, I get quite suspicious and cynical. I've studied science. I know science is all about an empirical, experimental approach to observing patterns that are repeatable and put into a hypothesis. It's about trying to control multiple interpretations. I believe art is rather the opposite. Art is more the place where ambivalence and ambiguity and poetry and the things that make us human thrive. To come to a solution in science is to reduce the possibilities to something predictable. To come to a resolution in art is to get to a great unanswerable question. If I'm speaking to someone who thinks they are completely different fields, I remind them that they are systematic modes of inquiry, and that science today is intensely creative and intensely weird. I can see both arguments, but I don't buy either.

You'll be speaking about the economy and arts at the conference. Give us some idea of what you'll say.

What happens when you virtualize the economy, when it becomes not a question of actual products, but rather the speed at which trading takes place and the perceived value of a symbol or trend, you'll find fluctuations like what we're finding now. It's sad, but we'll never be fully prepared for the fact that our economic system is spelling the end of civilization. The idea of infinite growth is untenable, it is unachievable, it is ecological suicide, and unfortunately if you question it, you get branded into a necrophilia for Marxism. The reality is that it is not sustainable, and fundamental change needs to come about.

What about artists supporting themselves?

I am finding several ways to maintain my operations. I think arts schools don't teach you how to best manage this issue. At least here in North America, speaking of money as an artist is taboo. If you're interested in money and being professional about your work and not having to do it as a hobby, you're looked down at. But the reality is that money buys independence and autonomy, which I defend passionately. My own economic model has to do with the performing arts. I make a project, and then I charge an exhibition fee. It's like booking a play. For five years, I've also been selling artworks to collections like MoMA [in New York City] and Tate [in London].

Do you think you can make art for a global world, something that speaks to both the power of community and to the uniqueness of the individual?

After Walter Benjamin wrote *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in his opinion, artwork was



Body Movies, Relational Architecture 6 (Hong Kong, China)



Pulse Tank (New Orleans Biennale, New Orleans, 2008)

losing its aura, the originality of the individual art object – the attraction the *Mona Lisa* would have to give us a unique and particular experience. What we're seeing with digital work is that the aura is back, and it's back with a vengeance. What happens is that as anybody approaches the digital artwork, the artwork will respond in a different way to this input. If an artwork is like a world or an environment, that environment is going to be read very differently by each and every participant, which means the uniqueness of that moment will be irreproducible. It will be singular. That's important because the aura is something we can manage as a vehicle to connect to people, to touch them or to ask certain questions. In the digital world, a reproduction is identical to its original. What this tells us is that it's not the actual object that in the end matters. It's the processes. ■■