Time-Based Art and Lure of Decentralization

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Tina Rivers Ryan April 21, 2026

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Garden*, 2026, interactive installation activated by Eli Keszler, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, 2026.

DURING THE LATEST edition of the TONO festival of time-based art in Mexico City this past March, I kept returning to a question that admittedly has dogged my own career: How might we imagine a future for time-based art that emphasizes its critical potential while capitalizing upon the inherent appeal of durational, live, and interactive experiences (to say nothing of the technological sublime)? With museums competing for our entertainment dollars and mega-galleries entering the hospitality field, how can institutions highlight the aesthetic possibilities of these practices without capitulating to the baser imperatives of the culture industry?

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Pulse Garden, 2026, interactive installation activated by Eli Keszler, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, 2026.

Perhaps modestly-scaled festivals like TONO can provide a model. Founded as a New York City-based nonprofit in 2022, TONO is led by Sam Ozer—a veteran of the curatorial programs at MoMA and MoMA PS1 who, last year, was announced as the inaugural curator-at-large of Canyon. That venture, backed by video art collector Robert Rosenkranz, opens on Manhattan's Lower East Side this fall. Billing itself as a "hybrid between museum, performing arts venue, and the downtown social scene," Canyon is yet another example of the institution-building for time-based art that has been accelerating over the past few years, alongside other venues including Superblue, Artechhouse, Onassis ONX New York, and Mercer Labs. Unlike these examples, TONO is a curatorial platform that partners with established arts institutions large and small, from the gleaming Museo Jumex to an outdoor theater in Mexico City's central Chapultepec Park, to offer special events that are largely free and frequently unticketed. Ozer relayed to me that she thinks of TONO as like "Frankenstein's monster," assembled with "the rigor of a museum but the feeling of a music festival and scope of a biennale," drawing inspiration from events such as New York's Performa festival, the Berlin Biennale, Berlin's Atonal music festival, and Paris's multidisciplinary Festival d'Automne. TONO's fourth edition took place between March 6 and 22 and comprised around a dozen distinct events and installations. The marquee of these was the Mexican premiere of Tino Sehgal's This Joy (2020), at the Museo Casa Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo and the Casa De La Acequia. But the lineup also included emerging talents working

with relatively unclassifiable forms, such as Manchester-based Space Afrika's "YOBS" ("a site-specific event merging an eponymous live A/V show, sound installation, and film screening"), presented at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México's waterfront Casa del Lago. Having never attended TONO before, I worried it might border on the gratuitously spectacular, as though some events were mere backdrops for the production of social media content; but throughout my visit, the audiences were deeply engaged, figuratively and literally sitting with the works as they unfolded. This attention can be attributed to the seriousness of the projects, the sensitivity of their curatorial framing, and also the curiosity of the spectators, who ranged from Mexican art-world insiders to university students and international visitors like me. But this was also due to the festival's scheduling of each event as its own "destination," more comparable to the standalone screenings of film festivals than the fleeting rooms of a biennial, passed through breezily on our way to the next.

After dusk on my first evening in town, I headed over to the Museo de Arte Moderno for a performance inside Mexican Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's solo exhibition "Jardín Inconcluso" (Unfinished Garden). Now extended through May 16, the show includes nine interactive installations, some old and some new, on view in the museum's sculpture garden and two of its buildings. For TONO, the New York-based, Grammy-nominated musician and artist Eli Keszler activated *Pulse Garden*, 2026, the latest in Lozano-Hemmer's series of works in which visitors submit their pulses to be sampled by custom sensors and turned into patterns of sound and light. These patterns are layered onto each other over time, creating an interactive visual and sonic palimpsest that abstractly represents its participants as a kind of ad hoc, dynamic, and wonderfully cacophonous community, preserving a sense of the democratic friction that is too often elided in crowd-generated art.

Alongside the museum's public visitors for the evening, the performance's attendees included a group from London's Serpentine Galleries, including the ubiquitous Hans Ulrich Obrist; Mexican artist Tania Candiani, who recounted being the first participant (aside from the artist himself) in Lozano-Hemmer's inaugural pulse work, *Pulse Room*, in 2006; and Julia Villaseñor Bell, director of communication and media at Kurimanzutto, accompanied by family members including her precocious pre-teen niece, Eloise, who confidently informed me that "Mexico is a vibe." Despite having seen several of the "Pulse" works in the past, I was unprepared for what happened when Keszler commandeered the outdoor installation, which was visible from the sidewalk outside the museum, for a forty-five-minute percussive performance: The lights energetically responded to his rapid-fire runs, replacing the typical twinkling incoherence of the Garden's ersatz body politic with a coherent, auteur son et lumière experience—the kind of high-intensity stroboscopic spectacle that makes museum directors salivate, except with avant-garde bona fides.

Kiani del Valle, *Mundos Rotos* (Broken Worlds), 2026. Performance still.

The next evening, I walked past the museum and through Chapultepec Park to arrive at the Casa del Lago, where rows were rapidly filling for the premiere of a dance solo by Puerto Rican choreographer and artist Kiani del Valle, fresh off her work on Bad Bunny's Super Bowl halftime show. Set to the live audio production of Kelman Durán—who mixed samples of people speaking about struggle and resistance with dark, foreboding electronic tones—*Mundos Rotos* (Broken Worlds) is billed as a three-act meditation on our need for, and lack of, connection. Del Valle began the performance by pushing through panels of red fabric hanging from the ceiling; apparently shadow-boxing with herself while progressively shedding layers of red clothing, she curled into a ball, hung her head behind her long curtain of hair, reached out into space, or pulled herself up, her body writhing like a live wire, until at last she dramatically collapsed, as if shot dead: a surprisingly pessimistic ending to what otherwise felt like an exorcism of our collective antisocial demons.

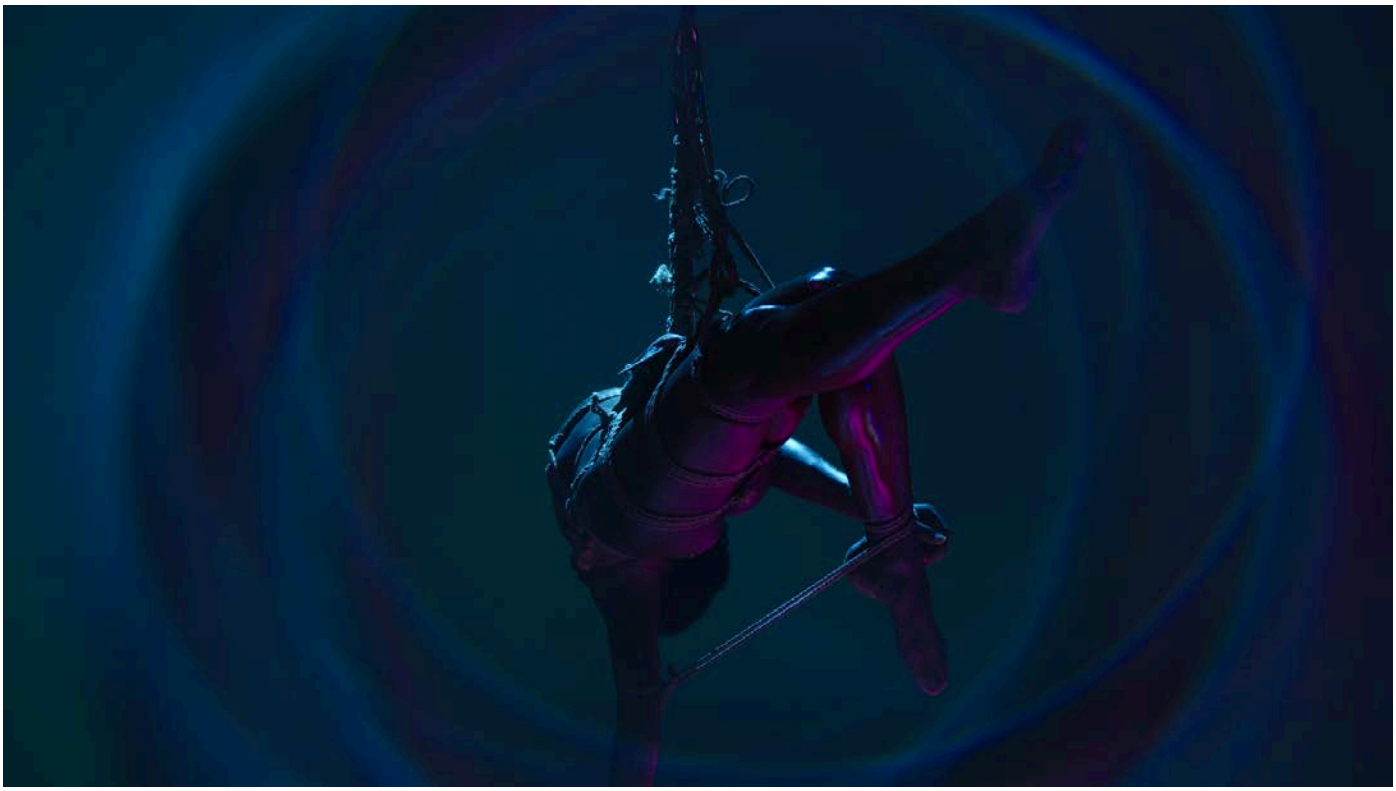
Alexa West, *Jawbreaker*, 2025–26, performance with Cayleen Del Rosario, Benin Gardner, Amelia Heintzelman, Molly Ross, and Isa Spector; scene design by CH & Herrero; lamp post by Harrison Milne and Wyatt Acardi. Tono Festival, Mexico City, 2026.

Widespread conflict paired with inner turmoil reappears in Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen's 2019 video installation *Hotel Aporia*, which, despite similarly trafficking in macabre imagery, could not have been more different in tone. The most polished of TONO's programming this year, the show (on view through April 27) is installed in the ground-floor galleries just off the glass-ceiling entrance hall of the Museo Amparo, one of Mexico's most important—and better funded—contemporary art spaces, located two hours outside of the capital in Puebla, the country's fourth-largest city. Directed by the gregarious Ramiro Martínez Estrada (formerly of the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City and MARCO in Monterrey), the museum houses a collection of Mexican pre-colonial, colonial, and modern and contemporary art. For the last two editions of TONO, Ozer curated presentations in these same galleries by Ali Cherri and Saodat Ismailova, both of whom subsequently rose to greater prominence on the international art circuit, with solo shows in New York this spring at Almine Rech and the Swiss Institute, respectively. This year, she has pulled off a smart and seamless installation of this emotionally difficult and conceptually dense video work about the last suppers of the Japanese kamikaze pilots of World War II (cut through with materials relating to contemporaneous Japanese philosophy and propaganda), complete with tatami-like mats on the floor and custom-built walls evoking the Taishō-era inn where the work was first installed for the Aichi Triennale in 2019. From some vantage points, the projections onto one

screen shone through and were visible through another, creating a visual collage that intensified the work's complicated layering of historical moments and perspectives. Also worth mentioning are the perfectly-constructed screens, calibrated projectors, and discrete cable management—all things I have learned to never take for granted, even at larger organizations, but which make the world of difference for time-based art.

Ho Tzu Nyen, *Hotel Aporia*, 2019. Installation view, Museo Amparo, Puebla, Mexico, 2026.

The consistently meticulous execution of the TONO events and installations I attended revealed an ambition that more than compensated for the fact that many of the works, such as those by Sehgal and Nyen, had not been newly commissioned. In truth, I find Ozer's decision to focus TONO's resources on a combination of producing new works and restaging ones that have not yet had their day in the sun in Mexico refreshingly ego-free, and evidence of an emphasis on creating opportunities for a specific time-based arts community to flourish. It now remains to be seen whether TONO, which has largely focused on Mexico City, will succeed in a different locale: Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie partnered with TONO on this edition and will present one of the works at its own "PERFORM!" festival this fall, curated by director Klaus Biesenbach with Lisa Botti and Gregor Quack. (The Berliners were in attendance for the closing events, with Biesenbach participating in a brief chat with Ozer on his own history of curating performance art before a bilingual panel discussion with many of the TONO artists.)



Still from Oat Montien's *Pearl Boy*, 2025.

Ultimately, however, the larger question is whether TONO and other festivals for time-based arts—including many that are largely ignored by the mainstream contemporary art world, such as the LOOP festival of moving images in Barcelona and Montreal's MUTEK festival of digital art and music—can continue to offer a meaningful alternative to historically more conservative (or now, more "spectacular") brick-and-mortar curatorial programming without fully descending into the "festivalism" of the biennial circuit. This is not to say that one model is necessarily superior to the other: As I discussed with Thomas Rom, the chairman of the board of New York's Performance Space, at TONO's closing dinner, a viable ecosystem for time-based art must be big enough to encompass different kinds of institutions, each with their own funding models, curatorial frameworks and competencies, and audiences. But for a few days in Mexico, at least, it was an undeniable pleasure to experience time-based art as a kind of network of individual nodes distributed across the cultural landscape of a specific city, with the range to encompass discrete, and differing, contexts and critical conversations that felt truly "live."

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