CANADIAN art

FEATURES

Venetian Opera

The Montreal-based artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer represents Mexico in Venice with interactive, technology-based artworks and plans for a Gothic palace

by Christine Redfern

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, 2005
PHOTO BERND HIEPE

Installation view of *Pulse Room*, Plataforma Exhibition, Puebla, Mexico 2006 100 incandescent lamps, heart-rate sensors and computerized dimmers
PHOTO ANTIMODULAR RESEARCH

In recent years, the Mexico-born, Montreal-based Rafael Lozano-Hemmer has been one of Canada's most exciting artists on the international scene, yet locally, few people know his name. Lozano-Hemmer's work breaks down the traditional artist/viewer dichotomy, not only requiring input from viewers to function, but often giving them a platform for artistic expression of their own. Finally, though, Canadians will have a chance to experience his work on home soil. As of June 1, The Power Plant in Toronto and the Art Gallery of Ontario will exhibit two of his large-scale works as part of the Luminato festival. This fall, he is part of an exhibition at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal. Additionally, his summer 2007 schedule is filled with prestigious international events: he will represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale, is included in "Art Unlimited," a special section of Art Basel reserved for large-scale works, will speak at Tate Modern and opens his work 33 Questions per Minute *at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. We recently got together to talk about his work for Venice.*

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer:
The Mexican Pavilion is located in the Gothic-style Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel in central Venice. *Pulse Room*, which consists of 100 bulbs hanging from the ceiling, takes over the whole second floor. When you grab the sensor handles, the closest light bulb flashes in time with your heartbeat and records the pattern. The moment you release the handles, all the lights turn off and then each recording moves one step along the line—so each flashing bulb represents a different person's heartbeat. The effect is mesmerizing, for the patterns syncopate and then they get synchronized. It reminds me of the music of American minimalist composers like Steve Reich and Glenn Branca,

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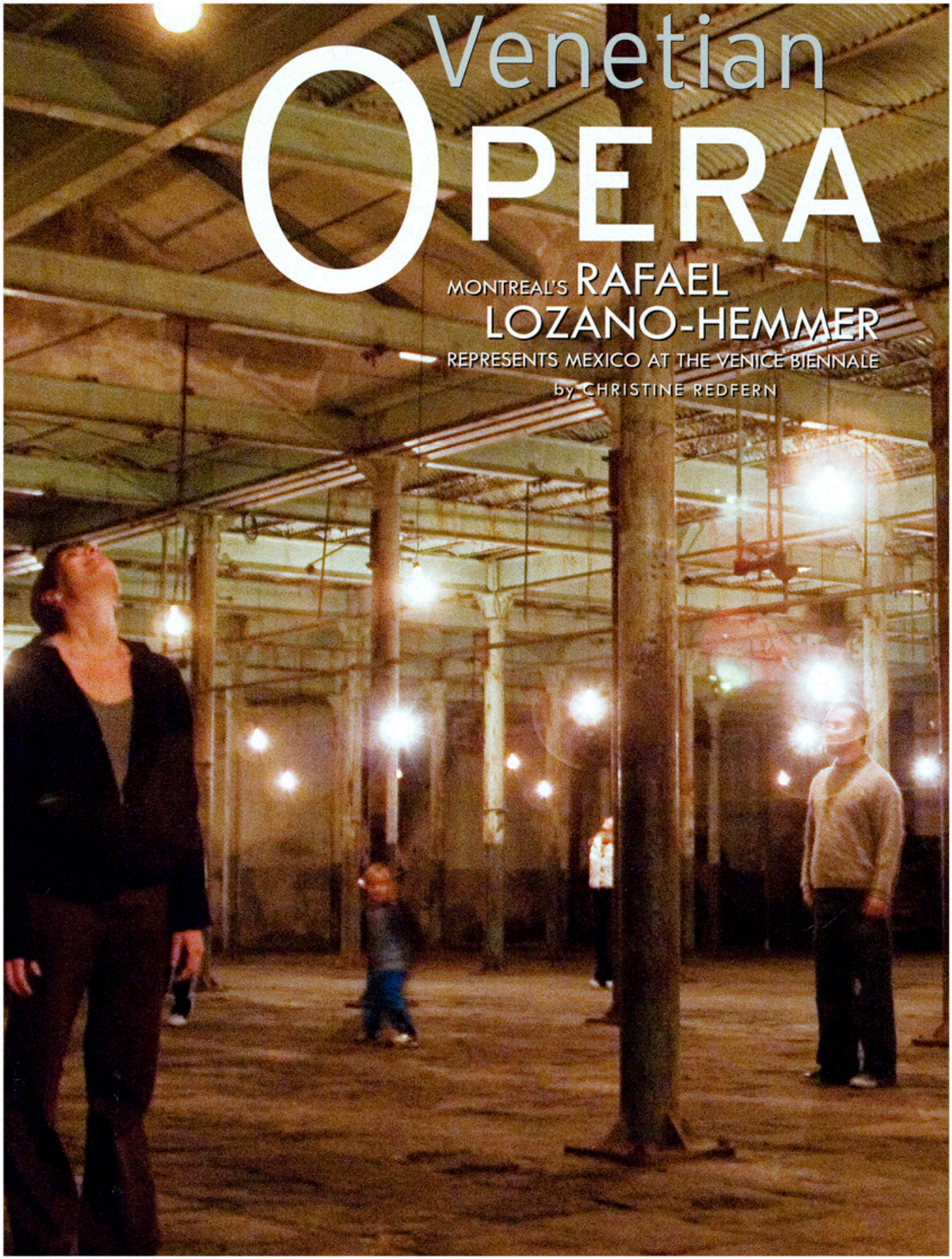
Redfern, Christine. "Venetian Opera. Montreal's Rafael Lozano-Hemmer represents Mexico at the Venice Biennale", *Canadian Art*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2007, p. 68.



Venetian OPERA

MONTREAL'S RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER REPRESENTS MEXICO AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

by CHRISTINE REDFERN

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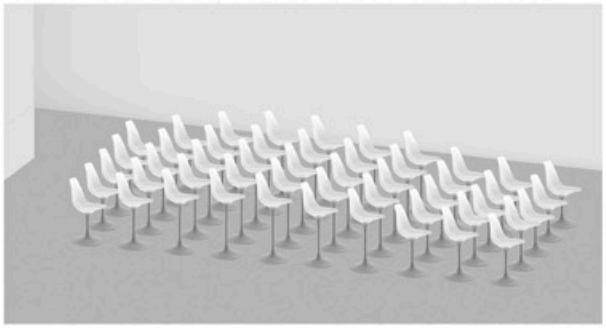

Wavefunction (sketch) 2007
50 Eames chairs, computerized surveillance system, linear actuators, motors, custom circuits and PA system

whose work uses the repetition of simple, similar musical sequences to create rich and complex sound environments.

Another piece for Venice is a kinetic sculpture called *Wavefunction*. It involves 50 Eames side chairs, each with a robotic lift underneath that can raise and lower the seat by about 50 centimetres. We are working with the math of water waves. When you walk into the room, a computerized surveillance system detects your presence and automatically lifts the chairs nearby, creating the crest of a wave that then radiates away from you. When multiple people are in the room, their waves interact and create interesting dynamics. This piece is in keeping with all the rest of my work. It is about absence and presence, it's about representing the public, it's about who's observing whom—the same themes that I keep working on. But the math also interests me; the patterns that you can get from these waves can be supercomplex—like eddies and turbulence. It would be hard to preprogram something that could have the interesting array of possibilities that you get in the natural behaviour of liquids. Maybe it is a little too obvious because it is in Venice, where people are looking out the windows at all the canals and then here you are seeing the physical world reacting like it is floating. The piece will be accompanied by Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna*.

Christine Redfern: Why that opera? It is a really interesting piece about absence, quite romantic. It provides a tragic and ironic juxtaposition that I enjoy.

These days, what catches your eye technologically? I'm very interested in the new generation of computerized surveillance. While I completely admire and follow the work of Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman and Julia Scher, for example, people who have worked with CCTV surveillance, today the cameras don't have a human operator behind them. Today the cameras automatically look for what kind of ethnic group you fit into; they assess you against a database of suspicious individuals. The ominousness of this kind of technology requires a new kind of art to respond to it.

Let me show you a public-art project we just did that will also be at Venice. We made a shadow play not unlike *Body Movies* [a previous Lozano-Hemmer work]. It consists of 1,000 video portraits that are activated by the shadows of the participants. As you walk around, the computer knows that you are covering a portrait and the portrait wakes up. It makes eye contact, which is quite uncanny. The longer the viewer remains in one place, the more the portrait interacts. The face checks you out and it is kind of stuck in a loop. If you are uninterested in the guy or the woman and move away, they go back to sleep and disappear.

We have a very large database. We hired eight local filmmakers to go to rock concerts, universities and community centres and explain to people what we were doing. And people were free to do whatever they wanted. The only thing we asked was that they look straight at the camera at some point; the moment you are on top of them and activate the portrait, the eye-contact video sequence is triggered. So we had people taking off their clothes, people doing sign language; others would photograph you or kiss you or do something rude. Robotic projectors can put the portraits anywhere over a huge area. It is like the technology required for a really expensive light show, but the effect is super-intimate and not spectacular at all. In terms of surveillance, it is heavy-duty, because it not only detects your presence but predicts where you will be in the future. All of this is unknown to the people doing it; all you see is that there are people constantly appearing in your shadow.

In hindsight, what was the first piece you created that meant anything? Probably *Surface Tension*, which I've just revived. It will be at Venice too. Basically this piece was interactive stage design. In the beginning, I frequently worked with actors and dancers and we created theatre. The dancers and the actors would control their own computer graphics or lights or music and this was one of the modules. So the dancer would dance in front of this large eye and the eye would follow him or her. At the end we'd let the public come onstage so they could see it was not rehearsed or perfectly timed, but that the eye is actually following you.

Are your days of working in theatre over? No, I think it will come back. Theatre is definitely a passion of mine. In Mexico, there is a very powerful actress and theatre director named Jesusa Rodríguez. The name of our show was *Technological Theatre*, and she said, "Rafael, how do you dare put something as rich and sophisticated as theatre with something as primitive as technology?" And she is right on, because the language of theatre is so rich and it has been around for so long, while technology is stuck in this sort of gadgetry thing. I think that is changing now, for it is impossible to imagine a world without this technology. So my position is that I work with it not because it is new, but because it is inevitable. ■

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