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For the Nerds: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's First Solo Show at Pace Makes Data Beautiful

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer.
COURTESY PACE

Titled "Common Measures", **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (https://www.artnews.com/t/rafael-lozano-hemmer/)**'s first solo exhibition with **Pace Gallery (https://www.artnews.com/t/pace-gallery/)** features three large pieces that exemplify the artist's poetic fascination with data and technology. But don't call him an innovator.

"Despite the fact that I work with technology, I really dislike the word 'new' in **new media (https://www.artnews.com/t/new-media-2/)**," Lozano-Hemmer told *ARTnews*. "Anybody that thinks what we're doing is new is someone who has not studied enough art history."

To that end, Lozano-Hemmer invited to his opening six influential artists, including Marta Minujín and Manfred Mohr, who have both been creating art in this vein for over 50 years. He is dedicated to the preservation of the intertwined histories of art and technology, especially as it relates to Latin America. A longtime interest, he previously organized a

presentation called “Tech-Mech” (as in, Tex-Mex) that highlights technological contributions by Latin Americans.

Though most of Lozano-Hemmer’s works tend toward universal themes, threads of his Mexican heritage are ever-present in his pieces. *Call on Water*, for example, is a fountain that excerpts lines from the work of Mexican poet Octavio Paz; the work was, in fact inspired by a line in Paz poem. Rendered in mid-air using cold water vapor, it’s a piece that has to be seen to be believed.

“Paz wrote that when poetry is spoken, it becomes part of the atmosphere and when you breathe it in, you make it part of your body,” Lozano-Hemmer said.

The second work on display at “Common Measures” is *Pulse Topology*, a piece that Lozano-Hemmer has been tinkering with since 2006. A series of lightbulbs are installed which blink to the pace of a participants’ heartbeats, which are logged and saved when a participant puts an EKG monitor over their finger. In 2006 the work had 100 lightbulbs, in its current, largest form, it has 3,000. One other tweak includes installing new, state of the art subwoofers, so when audiences enter the gallery space, they feel enveloped in what Lozano-Hemmer calls the, “maternal, beaming” heart.

The final work was inspired by something even closer to home: Lozano-Hemmer’s teenage kids. “Sometimes when I speak to them, you know, I feel like I’m just speaking to the hormones,” he said.

That piece, *Hormonium*, is a screen-based, generative work that displays the acronyms of hormones, GH (for growth-hormone), TSH (thyroid stimulating hormone), and so on. The hormones on display change depending on the time of day, the time of month, and even the year. The work itself ages, and will display different hormones as time goes on.

“Right now, the work is zero years old,” said Lozano-Hemmer. “So you’re seeing a lot of growth hormones. Once the work is about 12 years old, the growth hormone stops appearing and you start getting more reproductive hormones.”

The work, which was completed with the help of an endocrinologist, will continue to age until it is 90 years old, and then it will die. If 90 seems a bit generous for the average human life span, that’s because it is. The first edition of the work was sold to an 82 year old Spanish woman, who requested that it die at 90 instead of in its 80s, Lozano-Hemmer said.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Hormonium, 2022

There are six editions of the work in total that are available for sale, though the software itself if freely available on git.hub, a website that allows for software developers to share their code.

“I have long proposed that digital artwork needs to be free,” he said. “It needs to be open source. It needs to be something that future generations can look into, instead of [from] a proprietary approach.” His distaste for the over-capitalistic has kept him from making NFTs, a potentially awkward stance considering **how heavily (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/market/pace-verso-spring-2022-zhang-huan-lucas-samaras-1234616576/)** his gallery, Pace, **has invested (https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/pace-gallery-web3-nft-platform-art-blocks-1234630861/)** in the novel technology.

“Marcel Duchamp said that the artist is a creator of context and my problem with the context of NFTs is that the context is usually speculation, value, money, trading, and so on,” he said. “Commodity as a context is not so interesting for me.”

Lozano-Hemmer mentioned, however, that he could see himself making an NFT in the future if he felt he could contribute something significant to the field.

As an artist working with digital technologies who has been selling work long before the advent of the NFT, Lozano-Hemmer developed his strategy for distributing and selling his work long ago. In the case of *Harmonium*, buyers receive a computer with the software that produces the work in a non-repeatable fashion. But given that the software is freely available, there is an added piece that collectors get: an aluminum ingot engraved with the artist’s watermark and technical information about the piece. There are only six editions available.

“This is the thing that has value,” Lozano-Hemmer said, similar to how a smart-contract is the store of value with an NFT on blockchain, or the instructions to realize a work of conceptual art.

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