Surveying the new media scene with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

A monthly series profiling cutting-edge creators of all stripes with ties to Montreal.

par Michael-Oliver Harding
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The criticism often leveled at artists working with new media technologies is that it's all razzle-dazzle execution, with little to no reflection. That's certainly not the case for Mexican-Canadian interactive artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, who uses robotics, face recognition algorithms and 3-D-printed speech bubbles to question sweeping notions of justice, power and freedom. For the past 25 years, the Montreal-based artist—who also represented Mexico at the 2007 Venice Biennale—has brought to life interactive installations designed as input-output machines. Take *Pan-Anthem*, for instance, a sound piece with moveable individual speakers fixed across a wall that play national anthems as a visitor approaches them, and which are organized according to statistics such as countries' respective murder rates. His performances await spectators' feedback and engagement, oftentimes existing only if and when such encounters occur.

What's most refreshing about Lozano-Hemmer, whom we met in a gadget-packed Plateau studio teeming with activity, is he'll be the first to acknowledge his own "complicity", as he put it, with various power structures. Having recently returned from Art Basel Miami at the time of our interview, he recognized being "an accomplice to what I'm denouncing," given that part of his studio's very survival depends on how successful it is at navigating the international art market. The clear-sighted artist, who considers Montreal, Madrid and Mexico City his three homes, explained to us why he never plays it safe, how he highlights unresolved tensions through his work and why we must overcome the disconnect between new media arts and established museum traditions.

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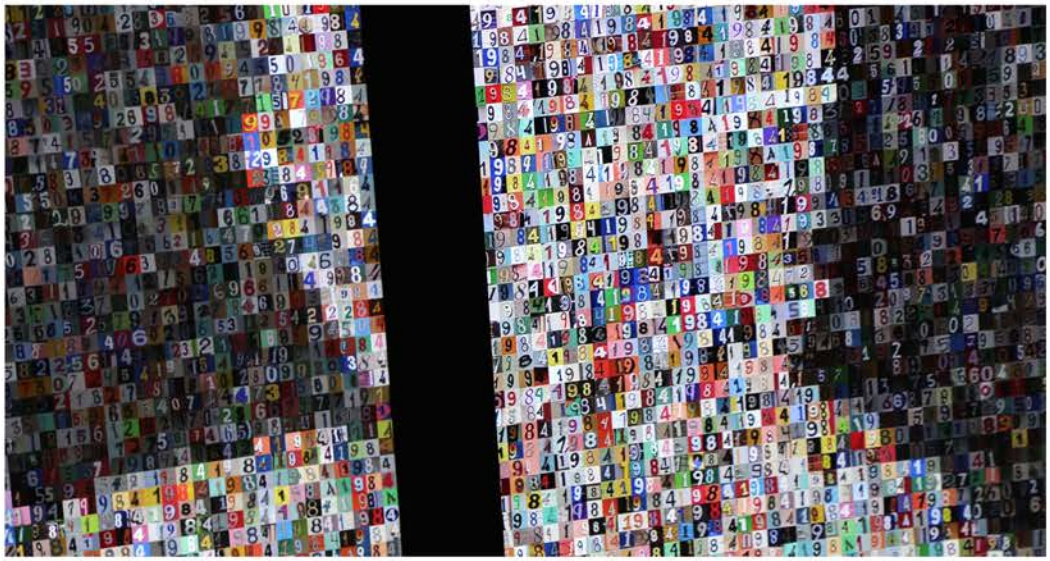

Inviting the audience into your interactive realms, sparking active participation and perverting a variety of technologies are all key elements of your practice. Where does your interest in toying with and subverting high-tech tools stem from?

The key is to understand technology not as a neutral tool, but as something that comes from a specific baggage of military and corporate development. When you look at R&D, the bulk of it is about communications and control in the battlefield. Internet comes from Pentagon money, from [U.S. Department of Defense agency] DARPA, or Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. The core of our technologies aren't neutral; they're culturally specific. That culture is often predatory and based on a will to power. The idea for the artist working with technology is to not be naïve and think it merely empowers people, for instance. Rather, be aware that it comes from that legacy. If you're a critical artist, you have two possibilities: either refuse to engage with the technology, which a lot of established people in contemporary art have done, and which seems naïve to me, because technology is inevitable. The other option is to embrace it and pervert its uses. If it was used to do something in particular, be aware of that and propose alternatives, interruptions or eccentricities. The way we relate to technology is one of criticality, of acknowledged complicity.

In recent years, there's been a gradual embrace not just by artists but also curators and the art world in general of technology as inevitable, like you're saying, that it's the language of globalization and something we should adopt.

Absolutely. At the same time, you could take the position that it's been rather swift. If you look at how long it took photography to be considered part of the established fine arts, it was over 100 years. So the sense of media arts being welcomed into the museum in a matter of 40-50 years is pretty fast. If our economy, our wars, our love and our politics are being done through globalized networks of communications, it's only natural that artists should engage with that as

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Your academic training is in chemistry. I'm wondering what it's like coming from a school of thought where accuracy and certainty are virtues, as an artist and critical thinker who considers the unresolved human implications of the technologies you use.
Well, the artists I admire all have this sense of self-analysis, hesitation or fragility, which is key. But in most other applied fields, like you're saying, that's not welcome. You just want this veneer of security and assertion. I think being critical is a humbling affair, because the fundamental part of being critical is being insecure. As a career-oriented person, that doesn't sell. They don't like it when people are stammering, when things don't have a clear answer. The critical person is one who will speculate, take a step back, relish in his insecurity, and make an artwork that really pushes that insecurity forward. The whole notion of experimental is being comfortable with not having control. For me, criticality is a humbling affair.

Is it difficult to maintain a sense of creative flexibility and uncertainty when working on large-scale, tech-driven projects that require the involvement of so many collaborators? It sounds like a tricky balancing act.
It can be a real problem. There are times where certain things should not be discussed, for example. I started out with a group of artists, composers and choreographers called PoMo CoMo. The problem with that production structure was that we all respected what we were doing, we would get together and produce a piece that was really the sum of different concessions. What is needed in my opinion is a really strong backbone, an idiosyncrasy, a bias. Sometimes, we need to follow that bias without needing to explicate it. You have a nightmare or a

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Meaning your artworks are in constant flux and you keep putting out their latest iterations?
Exactly. I see my works closer to the performing arts than the visual arts. If you see the first version of a Robert Lepage play, you come back a year later and it's completely different. It has undergone processes of almost beta testing, where the piece gets stronger and stronger until Lepage's happier with the end result. I think that happens in media arts a lot.

I guess the dilemma that brings to mind is when to consider any given work as finished or complete? Or perhaps that's me thinking in a very linear, arts world kind of way?
Well, here's what happens. I come up with a project, it's a prototype, I put it out there, and then lots of iterations happen after its inaugural presentation. That's something the art world is not well prepared to understand. The performing arts world is. What's more, I worry sometimes about the culture of proposals and grants. Sometimes you just have a feeling, and yet you're expected to articulate so many issues a priori, that this capability for the piece to improvise or switch radically is diminished.

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Is that why you keep *Navier-Strokes*, this piece of computer-controlled lightboxes you described to me earlier as a "failure", in your office? To remind yourself it's okay to be flexible, try stuff out and tank from time to time?

Maybe it's a reminder, yes, but a reminder that I have to do something with this piece, that sometimes we make really terrible calls. (laughs) Financially, that piece is a ruin. Here's the thing: I'm trying to make my experimentations as a free as possible, but on the other hand, I have a studio with 10 people, there's a payroll, they have kids and mortgages, and in a way I have to think about the financial stability of the studio, which is a real taboo to speak with other friends about. The artists never want to talk about money, sustainability or how to manage a team. I do. Because if I'm successful in maintaining operations, I don't have to do a project for BMW. I can maintain a fierce independence and eccentricity.

Even in this era of artists fully pimping themselves out at Art Basel Miami, for instance, you think money remains a taboo topic?

Well, it's tricky. Everything I say are gross generalizations, so there are exceptions to all of it, but I find that when artists talk a lot about money, they're put in the category of Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, or any of the people who are really ostentatious. That's not my case. My aspiration is not to be so wealthy and pimp out a car. I want to be ostentatious about time. For me, the real porn is not how wealthy you can become, but how much time you can spend developing a piece. That's the real luxury. When would an artist be really wealthy? When they can sit at the studio and say, 'that piece is not ready. We're not shipping it.' Like, whoa! Money is just one more vehicle to create those conditions, to have that freedom.

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Do you think the freedom to be self-sustaining—to move beyond merely struggling to survive—is hard to come by in a city like Montreal? Artists frequently complain about Quebec's weak network of arts collectors.

That's true. We don't have a tradition of collection, of private and corporate people wanting to invest in these kinds of risky undertakings. Sometimes, artists are coming up with pieces that are difficult to imagine surviving in the market, but you have to take those risks. I feel like Montreal has lost the radicalness it had, in a way, in 1967. I romanticize the city back then because I look at what was done, and the scale at which it was done. You look at Buckminster Fuller [the architect responsible for the Biosphere], for instance. The ideas were so big and radical, and yet they were executed. They were embraced by politicians and funding institutions, and we went into debt. And that's what you need to do if you want to compete in a global world of ideas, to attract talent and retain it. You have to be very bold with your investments.

What do you make of current arts investments in Montreal?

I'm afraid sometimes that the work coming out of these investments is just entertainment. There's nothing wrong with festival culture and fun projections, but we also need to take things further, to make them dangerous. I think the artists are here and the locations as well, like MUTEK, Elektra, Phi Centre and Arsenal. It's not like we're missing the people with the tools to make it happen. It just requires somebody who will take the risk. But it's only a question of time. At some point, Montreal will take its place as an experimental, risky city.

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Going back to this idea of an artist's financial stability, you put together a *Best Practices Guide for conservation of media arts*, to alleviate the concerns of collectors interested in purchasing interactive pieces. Would you say the media arts milieu is becoming savvier about monetizing conservation?
Not yet, but it's a debate that has to take place because it's a cruel thing to ask an artist who is just surviving—and that's about 95% of them—how their works should be preserved. The artists are not eager to do it because, understandably, they're overwhelmed with maintaining operations. But if you tell the artist that the artwork will generate income for their studio moving forward, because when the piece needs improvements, the collector will give more money to the artist, then they pay attention. My contribution is to say: conservation should be a part of an artist's practice, and it should be a revenue stream.

From an artistic standpoint, your contribution is also a socially minded one: you take an active stance in addressing injustices, atrocities and power imbalances, in pieces such as *Voz Alta* and *Level of Confidence*, where you commemorate the mass kidnapping of 43 Mexican students from Iguala. In your opinion, are notions of citizenry and artistry inevitably intertwined?
Well, I cannot help but understand my complicity with the capitalist, neoliberalist and globalized systems that have failed. I feel privileged and lucky to be in the situation that I am. I live in a certain luxury. So I understand and accept those privileges, but I'm also a citizen. As citizens, we need to do whatever we can from our standpoint to act according to a certain sense of moral duty. So it's complicated.

The piece you mentioned, *Level of Confidence*, was a very problematic work. Some friends in Mexico thought I was being opportunistic, that I was profiting from the tragedy of the disappeared. I disagreed, because

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pretend I will drop everything because of this. I'm just saying, from where I stand, this is a contribution I've tried to make. But it's not perfect and I see what they're saying.

This goes back to your claim of acknowledging your complicity within systems of oppression.

That's it. And the artists that don't recognize this, in my opinion, are being naïve. That will be on my tombstone. "He acknowledged his complicity, now he's dead." (laughs) Because I don't see a way that's neutral, clean, independent and alternative. I think people who pretend they're outside of that system, which they criticize, are actually part of the problem. But I'm willing to be proven wrong.

Interview and photos by Michael-Oliver Harding

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