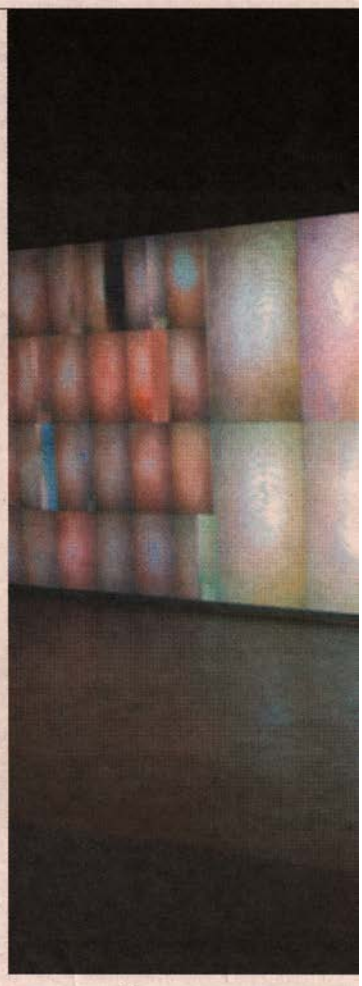
The Sydney Morning Herald

VISUAL ARTS

How to push people's buttons

Are interactive exhibitions any better than their conventional cousins? In the end, they all live or die on the ability of the artist to engage the imagination, writes JOHN McDONALD.



RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER: RECORDERS
Museum of Contemporary Art, until February 12

Like a Virgin airline flight, we are assured there is a serious side to Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Recorders* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Although this free exhibition of interactive installations feels like a piece of light holiday entertainment for the kids, it wouldn't be an MCA show if we were not informed that the work is "playful, open and inclusive" but also "ominous and predatory".

It sounds like a dream exhibition for any contemporary art space: a show that is playful enough to attract a popular audience but with a deeper meaning that allows the gallery to preserve the appearance of high seriousness. For it is never sufficient that such a show may simply be fun. It has to be menacing fun – fun that exposes the ubiquitous social control systems inflicted on citizens by the modern state.

Lozano-Hemmer (b. 1967) has gone a long way with his personal brand of interactive art. Born in Mexico, citizen of Canada, in demand around the world, he has become a regular inclusion on the biennale circuit and a go-to man whenever a big city wishes to undertake some ambitious public art event. He must have looked enviously at the Harbour Bridge, as Marc Newson prepared the latest New Year's Eve showpiece. How did he miss out on that one?

Lozano-Hemmer's contribution to last year's Singapore Biennale was one of the genuinely diverting pieces in a show that had more downs than ups. *Frequency and Volume: Relational Architecture 9* (2003), turned visitors into human antennae. As one walked across a large room, casting a giant-sized shadow, different radio frequencies were activated, creating that familiar sound one used to get from turning a dial – in days when radios still had dials.

Nothing at the MCA is quite so engaging but this is a different kind of exhibition. Every piece in *Recorders* has a memory. Every installation is able to store information and play it back. "Recorders" is one of the subcategories of Lozano-Hemmer's work, others being "performers", "generators", "subsculptures", "trackers", "anti-monuments" and "manifestos", although I'm not going to try to explain these terms.

Lozano-Hemmer does not expect us to contemplate his work from a distance – he demands a hands-on approach. The 12 installations at the MCA only come to life when the viewer becomes a participant in the piece. This doesn't require any special expertise. In *Autopoiesis* (2010), all one has to do is stand on a step and look into a mirror. When you see the word "autopoiesis" (AKA "self-generation") printed across your face, that's it.

In *Pulse Index* (2010), you stick your finger in a little hole and a computer does the rest. The fingerprint is projected on the wall, then added to a massive grid when pushed aside by the next fingerprint. Some viewers have expressed their dazzling individuality by adding a smiley face to their finger before insertion.

In *Pulse Room* (2006), when the viewer grabs hold of a couple of handles, his or her pulse is transmitted to a light bulb that begins flashing. When the next person grabs the sensors, each pulse beat is pushed down the line, through an entire room of winking bulbs.

Microphones (2008) requires a little more effort. You say something into one of a ring of old-style microphones. Your words are repeated and paired with an extra sound bite taken at random from 600,000 recordings of earlier participants. If you feel really energetic, you may type in a question to a wall installation titled *33 Questions per Minute* (2000) but don't expect an answer. Your query will be added to a stockpile of 55 billion unique questions generated by a computer program. At the rate of 33 a minute – the threshold of intelligibility – it would allegedly take 3000 years to get through every question. The computer-generated questions are so strange they might have been written by a language translation program.

The biggest piece is *People on People* (2010), which projects pictures of strangers into the over-large shadows one casts on a wall. You are also being recorded, meaning that one day you might appear in someone else's shadow, in another part of the world.

While people tend to move around in this installation, as if they were practising their Wii moves in front of the TV, in *Tape Recorders* (2011) they learn to stand still while a metal tape measure, mounted vertically on the wall, works out how long this position is maintained. Wait until the tape reaches the end and there is the satisfaction of watching it crash onto the floor.

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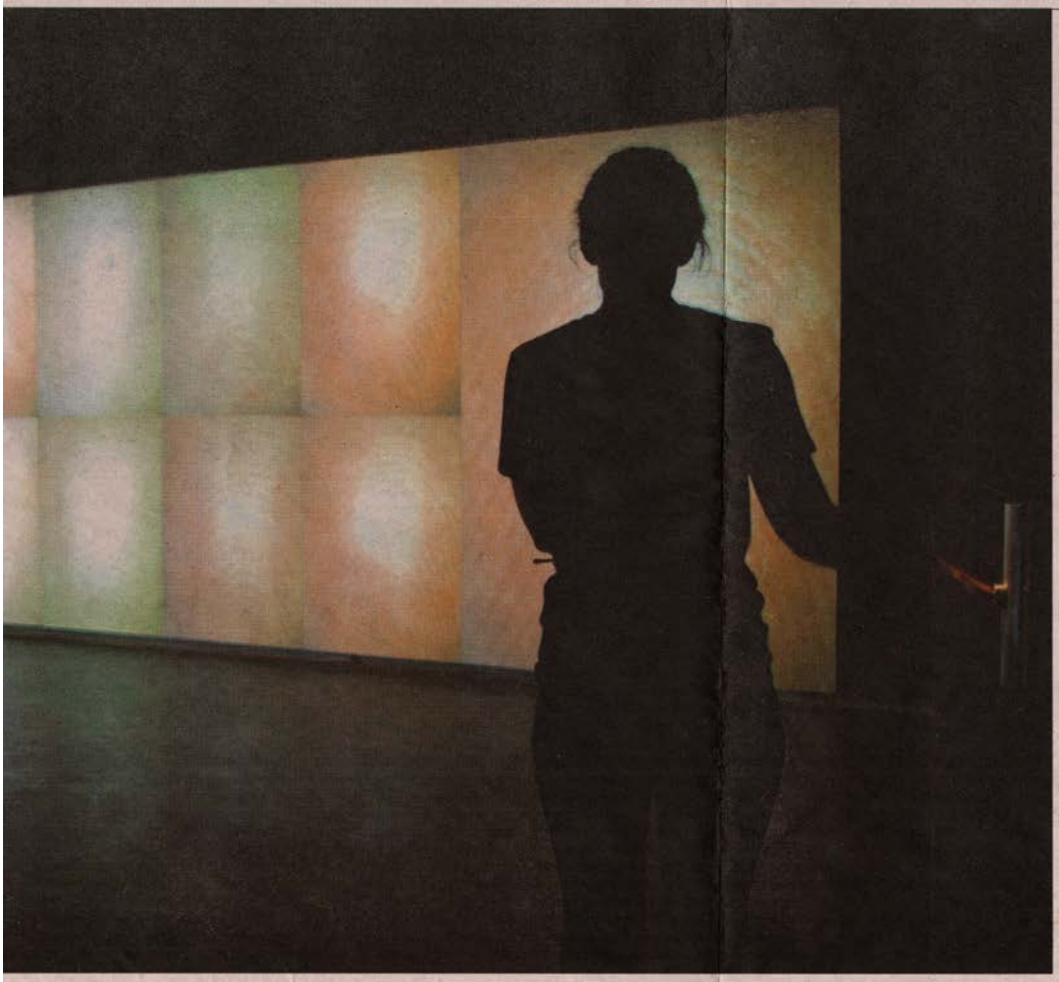

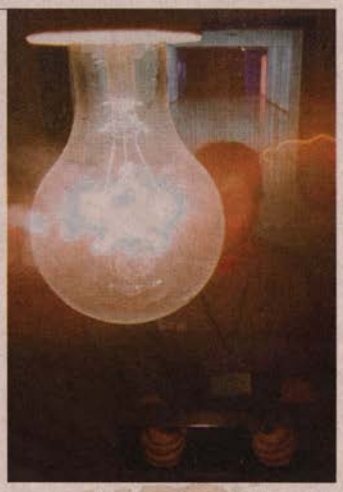

Shared experience ... works such as (from left) *Microphones* (2008), *Pulse Index* (2010) and *Pulse Room* (2006) invite viewers to engage with the installation. Photos: Alex Davies

By this stage you probably get the idea. A vast amount of high-tech wizardry is employed to generate a few simple effects. When I was at the MCA, one piece, *Please Empty Your Pockets* (2010), was on the blink – a perennial problem with shows of new-media art, even though the technology is far more reliable than it was in the early 1990s when museums began their romance with the machine.

One could spend hours in this show fiddling around, or get through it in about 15 minutes. Visitors will soon discover whether they are game players or not, although there is no incentive to keep playing. These are not poker machines, or even video games. In fact, it all feels a bit pointless, although I'm sure it's tremendously interesting for the artist and his acolytes.

The catalogue for this show is an essential part of the experience because it provides the social-political-cultural rationale for these apparently trivial exercises. One may have noticed that we live in a world full of surveillance cameras, fingerprint and biometric recognition devices and many other systems and gadgets keeping tabs on our movements, compiling data on every aspect of our lives. In Britain, the Tate Modern recently devoted an exhibition to this theme *Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera*.

It's no revelation that technology can never free itself from Frankenstein's curse. All the devices we use for our own security are also obliterating our privacy. The BlackBerry used by every second businessman proved just as congenial for the rioters who set London on fire last year.

Lozano-Hemmer is a connoisseur of dysfunction. He believes "good art slows down communication, adds noise, intercepts and miss-translates [sic] messages, creates intricate silences". He practises what he preaches by misquoting the painter, Frank Stella, who did not say: "What you see is what you get." He said: "What you see is what you see."

Lozano-Hemmer seems to feel that one only gets something from a work of art if one puts something into it, whether this be a dance in a room of shadows, or a mumble into a microphone.

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He doesn't dwell on the possibility that this idea applies to all works of art. Every painting, every sculpture invites an imaginative investment on behalf of the viewer – sometimes of a profound, far-reaching nature.

The catalogue is remarkable for the degree of sophistry one finds in the essays, which seek to make a case for the far-reaching, democratic relevance of interactive art. This is done largely by setting up a straw man of old-fashioned artistic elitism, which sees great art as beyond the grasp of the masses.

But who actually believes the public is "an undifferentiated mass"? Not the politicians, not the advertising industry, not the religious groups and not the champions of painting and sculpture. If one does not recognise and attend to the differences in this "mass", you will have no audience for your product.

The most gung-ho writer is one Timothy Druckrey, who expresses his contempt for "inert, rhetorical, solipsistic and often essentialist observer-based models", by which I think he means art that doesn't invite you to interact with it. He may also be referring to a range of other phenomena but his prose style is so impenetrable I can only guess. In order to condemn rhetoric and solipsism, he has apparently immersed himself homeopathically in these tendencies.

If we stop and ask the really big question – "In what way is this interactive art superior to conventional art?" – the catalogue writers have no persuasive answers. According to one, it creates "awareness of self" – a useful achievement. It also makes art into "a shared experience", just in case you felt lonely walking around the latest blockbuster. It is ultimately a false dichotomy because all art is "interactive". The only difference is that some of it engages the imagination and some of it asks you to stick your finger in a hole in the wall.

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