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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: visitor virtuoso

Mexican-Canadian electronic artist's exhibition perfectly embodies his idea that the crowd is the key to art

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Having had my image captured on CCTV, I was led through into a separate room where the contents of my pockets were scanned and my fingerprints recorded.

A recording of my voice was taken before questions were fired at me relentlessly, the queries coming almost too quickly to be answerable.

Finally I was left in a square-shaped room, as the soft light of a filament bulb dimly glowed overhead.

This was not a recreation of George Michael's most recent brush with the law, but rather the latest exhibition by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, arguably the world's most famous electronic artist.

The Mexican-Canadian, a multiple award winner, is perhaps most famous in the UK for a large-scale exhibition in 2008, which projected video images into the shadows of visitors in Trafalgar Square. In his latest exhibition, Recorders, Lozano-Hemmer takes the use of crowds, and digital devices, even further, with a strong feeling of surveillance running through the show.

Made up of seven separate pieces, Recorders invites visitors to leave a piece of themselves behind in the exhibition, which then becomes part of the art.

"We're taking Frank Stella's quip 'What you see is what you get'," Lozano-Hemmer said – referring to the American artist's 1964 statement that, for some, came to exemplify the minimalist movement.

"But here, it is 'What you give is what you get' – basically, in order to see something, you must give something."

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The seven artworks in the show indeed require the visitor to give something, to a point where, almost without thinking, you have handed over pretty much all the physical information – short of dental records and DNA – that it is possible to disclose.

In one of the pieces in the exhibition, the visitor is invited to probe a forefinger into a shiny metal orifice. The visitor's fingerprint is then magnified onto a large screen, showing the intricate print as well as picking up tiny beads of sweat and encrusted dirt.

This piece, Pulse Index, also uses an electrocardiogram to ascertain the finger-prodder's heartbeat. The close-up image of one's fingertip, throbbing red to the exact rhythm of the individual's heart, is then saved onto the screen until the next visitor scans their print.

The end result – a thousands-strong, pulsating fingerprint mosaic – is quite a sight.

Pulse Index sets the tone for the rest of the pieces in the exhibition, which use visitors to create art. At a preview on Wednesday, Lozano-Hemmer – tall and enthusiastic, wearing a bright orange T-shirt – explained his fascination with crowds and the recording of people, a theme which runs through much of his work.

"My parents were nightclub owners in Mexico," Lozano-Hemmer said. "And in the nightclub you have to have a good DJ, good lights and good drinks, but ultimately the party is made by the people that go into it."

Born in Mexico City in 1967, Lozano-Hemmer studied physical chemistry in Montreal, Canada, before moving into the art world. One of his first major projects led to him being credited with devising the world's largest light show, when he invited hundreds of participants to direct search lights over Mexico City.

His philosophy of the success of an event being dependent on the people who visit it – informed by his family's background in entertainment – is evident throughout Recorders. It's reflected in the microphones that record up to 600,000 visitors' voices, playing back a random snippet each time a new recording is made; in the device that scans the contents of pockets and adds the resulting images to a gallery; and in the room of lightbulbs, which flash in time to previous visitors' pulses.

Perhaps the centrepiece of the show is People on People, which bears the most explicit similarity to Lozano-Hemmer's 2008 Under Scan exhibition in Trafalgar Square.

Like Under Scan, People on People projects videos of people on to a surface, which are then triggered to play when a visitor's shadow passes over the image. The new piece, however, uses footage of previous visitors to the exhibit in these videos, recorded as they

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moved around the exhibition, adding both to the idea that it is the crowd that creates the artwork and to the atmosphere of surveillance.

Recorders, commissioned by Manchester Art Gallery and the Abandon Normal Devices festival – the latter is funded by the Legacy Trust, and part of the oft-quoted bid to extract a legacy from the London Olympics in two years' time – begins recording at the Manchester Art Gallery on Monday, and runs to the end of January next year.

Fugitives would be well advised to steer clear.

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