

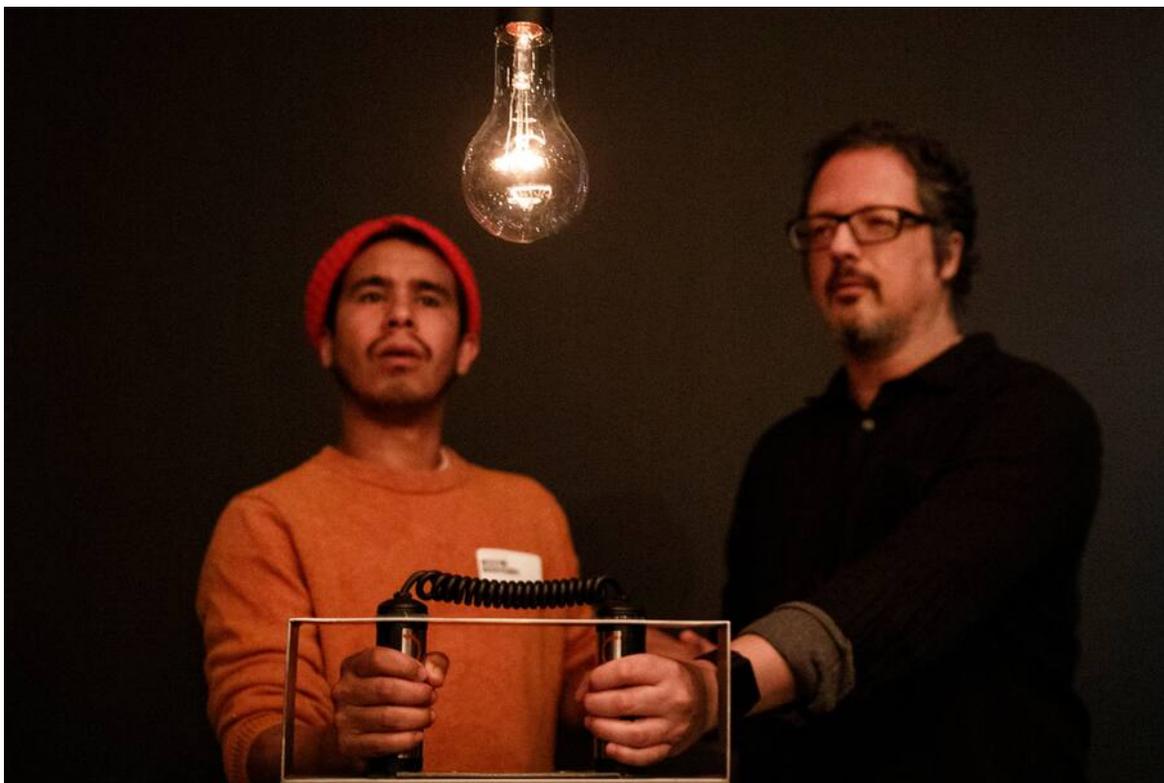
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Democracy Dies in Darkness

This new Hirshhorn exhibit will turn your heart into art

By **Sadie Dingfelder**

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Artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, right, shows a volunteer how "Pulse Room" turns his heartbeat into a mesmerizing light display. (Shawn Theew)

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's artwork lets you know you're alive. Through his elaborate installations, the Mexican-Canadian artist captures viewers' biometric data with high-tech sensors (like ones used in emergency rooms) and transforms the information into mesmerizing displays. Starting Thursday, the Hirshhorn will fill its second floor with three of Lozano-Hemmer's works for a six-month show called "Pulse." In the installation "Pulse Room," visitors touch a sensor that records their heartbeat and transfers it to a blinking light bulb. As each visitor contributes a pulse to the exhibit, previous pulses are moved forward a spot on a 211-bulb grid, and the oldest one disappears. Another piece, "Pulse Index," captures viewers' fingerprints and heart rates and displays them as a huge, ever-changing collage. The third installation, "Pulse Tank," transforms heartbeats into waves on the surface of enormous water tanks that are lit from underneath to create ballets of shadow and light on the museum's curved walls. Lozano-Hemmer talked to Express about his inspiration and the Hirshhorn exhibition.

What inspired you to make your first “Pulse” piece, “Pulse Room”?

When my wife was pregnant with twins, I learned that the ultrasound machine can let you hear the heart of the fetus. So, being a nerd, I asked for two ultrasound machines so I could listen simultaneously to the heart of the boy and the heart of the girl. They created this kind of syncopated beat — they would come in and out of sync, kind of like minimalist music. And I thought, wow, the individual heart is symbolic and intimate, and it’s a biometric that tells us about our emotional state. But when it’s together with other hearts, it creates a symphony. This experience inspired the piece, which shows hundreds of heartbeats all together in a room.

Do people follow their own individual heartbeat as it moves through the room?

Yeah, they do, and it’s quite sweet — especially when people come with their families and they all move through the room together. The heartbeat is not just your heart rate — we measure 10 variables from the sensor, things like systolic and diastolic activity — and then we convert that into the way that the light gets activated. The attack on the tungsten filament is different for each person, so you can see that your heartbeat is quite unique. Some people definitely do follow their heartbeat, others just kind of stand there in a state of observation. It’s almost like a rhythmic meditation.

Will the Pulse pieces start out blank and gradually fill up?

No, we start with recordings from the past show. These pieces are coming from Seoul, so we are bringing 10,000 fingerprints and 211 heartbeats from South Korea to Washington, D.C. Gradually, as people participate, more and more D.C. fingerprints and heartbeats will take over. We don’t archive the interactions. With the heartbeats, after 211 people participate, your light disappears. And that’s meant to be like a memento mori, a little reminder that we are on the planet for only a short period of time.

Why do you think your work is so popular?

Maybe it’s because people can participate. People feel a relationship of intimacy with my work because they help to create it. It’s part of a new culture of reality TV and selfies — of witnessing your own existence — which isn’t always a good thing. I think “Pulse Tank” is where people will spend the most time. It was originally commissioned for the New Orleans biennial in 2008, and we supersized it for the Hirshhorn. The light show that projects the ripples on the wall [from each of the three tanks of water] ends up being about 50 meters [or 164 feet] wide, so it’s quite intense.

How did you deal with the cylindrical shape of the Hirshhorn?

I love the architecture of the museum, but it’s also a real challenge for artists because we are not used to having these kinds of sight lines and curved walls. So instead of fighting it, I adopted it. In “Pulse Room,” the lights are normally mounted in a square grid, but in the Hirshhorn it follows the curvature of the building. We also use the curvature in the ripple tanks — we had tanks made with a subtle rounded finish that fit the Hirshhorn perfectly.

What’s it like having your show in D.C., on the Mall?

As a Mexican immigrant in Canada who’s created 15 jobs, I am mortified by any vision that sees immigrants as the enemy. There’s a lot of adversarial rhetoric going on right now, and I love that I have the opportunity to represent what immigrants do contribute. Also, as I’m creating these pieces in D.C., I can’t help but think about the ways in which these same biometric technologies are being used in ways I find appalling — for example, in the separation of families that’s taking place at the border. For me, it’s a beautiful opportunity to use these technologies of control and power to create connective experiences, poetic experiences, where we feel a sense of belonging instead of division and walls.