Rafael Lozano-Hemmer at the San Francisco MoMA

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Bruce Sterling January 12, 2020

*I would definitely go to that if it was in the time-zone.

*It's a press release.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (November 12, 2019)—The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) will present two major exhibitions celebrating the mixed media work of contemporary artists Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Tauba Auerbach this spring. The artist's first major survey exhibition in the U.S., Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence (April 25–November 1, 2020) will explore our presence in fundamentally turbulent environments through a focused selection of 16 engaging installations on the museum's seventh floor. Simultaneously on the museum's fourth floor, Auerbach's first museum survey, Tauba Auerbach — S v Z (April 25–September 7, 2020), will highlight her prolific and varied output over the last 16 years.

Also on view this spring will be select video projections from renowned interdisciplinary artists Cauleen Smith and Theaster Gates in Future Histories (April 25–November 1, 2020).

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence
April 25–November 1, 2020 Floor 7

Air and water, heartbeats and voices, text and light—these are the materials of media artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Over the past few decades, the Mexico City–born, Montreal-based artist has earned international recognition for large-scale participatory installations that frequently incorporate technology and the architecture of public spaces. On view in the U.S. exclusively at SFMOMA, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence brings together recent sculptural installations and immersive environments realized on microscopic and macroscopic scales. These works engage visitors' sense of play, and anxiety, as they experience the implications of technology and behaviors of participation in social and political contexts.

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"Unstable Presence refers to the dynamic, poetic, but also disturbing turbulence that characterizes social and technical interrelations," said Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts at SFMOMA. "Materializing on various scales, from the personal to the geopolitical, the instability of these layers of presence is powerfully echoed in the atmospheric but also sculptural installations."

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence additionally examines the concept of “co-presence” by highlighting how our physical presence and the natural and technological spaces we inhabit form a continuous stream of interaction. Lozano-Hemmer noted, “Presence is often associated with existence, continuity in time or material reality. The ‘unstable’ in the exhibition's title refers to interaction, improvisation and performance. The instability brought by participation allows constant reinterpretation of the work, where many outcomes are co-present.”

The exhibition focuses on three major themes in Lozano-Hemmer’s work: observation and surveillance; text-based poetic work; and the instability of systems. Highlights of the presentation include the following installations, the majority of which encourage visitor participation:

Airborne Newscast (2013) projects live news feeds from prominent international news outlets, such as Reuters, Agencia EFE, Notimex, AlterNet and AP. When visitors enter the space, their shadows disrupt the projections and dissolve the projected words into smoke-like patterns, creating an unstable atmospheric effect.

Call on Water (2016) is a fountain from which words emerge as plumes of vapor, produced by hundreds of computer-controlled ultrasonic atomizers. Fragment by fragment, poems by the celebrated Mexican writer Octavio Paz briefly materialize in the mist before dissipating in turbulence.

Pulse Spiral (2008) consists of hundreds of incandescent lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling in a three-dimensional spiral. This participatory installation records and responds to the heart rates of visitors holding sensors, transforming their heartbeats into mesmerizing flashes of light.

Sphere Packing: Bach (2018), the largest in Lozano-Hemmer’s Sphere Packing series, is a three-meter spherical frame supporting 1,128 loudspeakers, each simultaneously playing a different composition by Johan Sebastian Bach. Visitors can enter the sphere and be surrounded by the cacophonous crescendo of Bach’s entire musical output.

Vicious Circular Breathing (2013) is a large sculptural installation featuring brown paper bags that inflate and deflate at human breathing rates; a set of motorized bellows and valves that control the bags; and a sealed glass room with a decompression chamber. Visitors are invited to enter the glass room to breathe the air that was previously breathed by earlier participants. The piece includes warnings about the risks of asphyxiation, contagion and panic, offering a statement on the limits of the planet’s resources as well as a commentary on participation, which in this case makes the air more toxic for future visitors.

Voz Alta [Out Loud] (2008) commemorates the 40th anniversary of the massacre of hundreds of students in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, on October 2, 1968. The original site-specific “anti-monument” is presented in the gallery as a functional prototype: participants are invited

to step up to a megaphone and speak freely, their speech translated into light flashes via a miniature searchlight. An FM radio transmitter relays the sounds to which the light corresponds, and an archival recording of the 2008 memorial plays after a participant has finished speaking. In this way, the memory of the tragedy in Tlatelolco is mixed with live participation.

Zoom Pavilion (2015) is an interactive installation created in collaboration with artist Krzysztof Wodiczko. Consisting of projections fed by computerized surveillance footage, the work uses face recognition and other tracking algorithms to detect the presence of participants and record their spatial relationships. Independent cameras zoom in to amplify images with up to 35x magnification. The zooming sequences become disorienting as they change the image landscape from easily recognizable wide shots of the crowd to abstract close-ups.

ABOUT RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer was born in Mexico City in 1967, and lives and works in Montreal. He was the first artist to represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale, with an exhibition at the Palazzo Van Axel in 2007. He has also shown at biennials and triennials in Cuenca, Havana, Istanbul, Kōchi, Liverpool, Melbourne, Montreal, Moscow, New Orleans, New York, Seoul, Seville, Shanghai, Singapore, Sydney and Wuzhen. Lozano-Hemmer's works have been featured in solo exhibitions and performances in numerous institutions, including the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City (2015); SFMOMA (2012); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (2011); the Manchester Art Gallery (2010); the Guggenheim Museum, New York (2009); and the Barbican Centre, London (2008).

CATALOGUE

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence is accompanied by a catalogue featuring full-color illustrations of works in the exhibition and contributions covering a range of topical approaches. It includes a curatorial introduction and four essays from Olivier Asselin, Sean Cubitt, Tatiana Flores and Gloria Sutton that explore the poetic and political dimensions of the artist's work, along with in-depth examinations of four major works—Zoom Pavilion, Vicious Circular Breathing, Voz Alta and Pulse Room. Edited by Rudolf Frieling and François LeTourneux, the catalogue is published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in association with Delmonico Books/Prestel.

VENUES AND DATES
Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MAC): May 24–September 9, 2019
Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (MARCO): August 23, 2019–March 1, 2020
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA): April 25–November 1, 2020

ORGANIZATION + SUPPORT

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence is co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. The exhibition is co-curated by Lesley Johnstone, curator and head of exhibitions and education, François LeTourneux, associate curator at the MAC and Rudolf Frieling, curator of media arts at SFMOMA.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Lozano-Hemmer and Auerbach Press Release