Behind the Scenes with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voz Alta,* 2008 (memorial for the Tlatelolco student massacre, Mexico City, 2008); © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Spain; photo: Antimodular Research

Originally slated to premiere in Spring 2020, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence opens fall 2021 and has been restructured to accommodate COVID-19 safety precautions. "Vicious Circular Breathing" and "Pulse Spiral," referenced in the interview below, are no longer in the exhibition. Still, the works remain excellent examples of the participatory, large-scale installations that define Lozano-Hemmer's innovative practice.

SFMOMA: How does the title *Unstable Presence* capture this exhibition?

RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER: It's a paradox. Presence is often associated with existence, continuity in time, or material reality. The "unstable" here refers to interaction, improvisation, and performance. The instability brought by participation is welcome, because it allows constant reinterpretation of the work.

We live in a networked society where everything is fluid. We no longer have “points of reference,” but “flows of reference.” The economy, war, relationships — everything happens through the flow and capturing of data. It can have dire implications, but also new, poetic potential.

SFMOMA: What lessons and themes do you hope to impart?

RLH: Zero. My work is not moralist nor didactic. It’s about finding eccentric ways to interrupt established themes by creating platforms that are out of my control.

SFMOMA: Some of your works are very political, aren’t they?

RLH: They’re political, but less dedicated to politics with a capital P, and more focused on the micro politics of interaction. Many of my works in public spaces are designed to tour, and with each tour you get different behaviors from different cities. So I separate my work from “site-specific” practice and instead propose works that are “relationship specific,” where the specificity has to do with the temporary public takeover of a platform.

SFMOMA: You have a degree in chemistry. Do the observations and relationships that are part of that study influence your work?

RLH: For sure. I did my thesis on transition states — those moments where the reaction can go forward into results, or backward into its initial components. This lack of determinacy is super interesting in art. My work comes from experimentation — putting things together and not knowing the outcome. Ambiguity is a rich outcome. For example, your reading of a poem may elicit a completely different reaction than mine.

One of my influences is Ilya Prigogine, who studied nonlinear dynamics and the irreversibility of complex systems. This field allows artists to create works that have a behavior that is lifelike and outside their control. It’s a different approach to art-making where the work is developed in collaboration with code.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Call on Water,* 2016 (installation view, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, 2019); courtesy the artist and bitforms, Max Estrella, Wilde, and Pace galleries; © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Spain; photo: Mariana Yañez

CALL ON WATER

In this work, ultrasonic atomizers under a reflecting pool produce vapor as words in mid-air that spell out poems by Octavio Paz.

RLH: My studio has two main approaches to develop new work. Often I have a concept and we develop systems, technologies, or fabrication methods to realize the concept.

Other times, we encounter an existing material, equation, or technology and develop a work from that. For *Call on Water*, we started with a computer-controlled ultrasonic atomizer that allows water to vaporize.

It reminded me of Paz's idea that poetry, when recited, becomes part of the atmosphere and people can breathe it in. Atomizing water allows us to make his poetry into an atmospheric event. It was a natural match.

I'm attracted by the ephemeral. I like artworks that reflect constant change. To let poetry arise from this chaotic water is a reminder, a *memento mori*. Montaigne said that to philosophize is to learn how to die. Artwork is a bit that way, too. Things disappear, and that reminding is beautiful.

SFMOMA: How did you choose which poems to use?

RLH: Originally I wanted the fountain to write whatever people spoke into the basin, but voice-recognition technology was not accurate enough back then. So I turned to Paz, choosing his poems about fleeting existence, ambiguity, dissipation, and disappearance.

Words emerge slowly from the vapor, and you have to wait before the next line comes. It's certainly an inefficient way to read poetry, but puts you in a trance-like state. It's like Butoh dance. It drives you crazy for the first three minutes, and then you lock into this different way of understanding time.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Vicious Circular Breathing,* 2013 (installation view, *Pseudomatismos,* Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2015); Borusan Contemporary Art Collection; © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Spain; photo: Oliver Santana

VICIOUS CIRCULAR BREATHING

This hermetically sealed glass chamber invites the public to breathe air already breathed by previous participants. The room, with emergency exits and carbon dioxide and oxygen sensors, connects to motorized bellows, an electromagnetic valve system, and 61 brown paper bags that inflate and deflate according to visitors' circulated breath.

RLH: We began with a specific concept: let's invite the public to breathe air that has already been breathed. We created an aquarium-like sealed glass room, where people go in through a decompression chamber and sit down. I wanted breathing to be made tangible, so people

could see the biorhythms that keep us alive flowing through the machine.

Matching this chamber to a massive array of brown paper bags came from studying 17th-century organs, which have a beautiful system of bellows. The bag is a metaphor for lungs, but also a ration of food in Latin America. When you get a ration of rice or beans, it comes in a brown paper bag, called a *cartucho* in Cuba.

Finally, as a nerd, the element I am most proud of is the system's transparency. I asked the engineers to make everything transparent — tubes, valves, bellows — to allow you to follow the breath's circulation, something usually intangible.

It's a very mechanical work that accumulates viruses, bacteria, pheromones, and you share these airborne pollutants with others. As the oxygen levels go down, carbon dioxide goes up. To get out, you must go back through the decompression chamber.

SFMOMA: Why do something like this?

RLH: We have exceeded the limits of our habitat, what Buckminster Fuller called "Spaceship Earth." I think of the planet as one of the bubbles where immunodeficient people must live. We are the bubble people — 7.6 billion people sharing the same air. Creating a micro version of those limits to asphyxiate the public is the kind of symbolic perversion that I propose for our unprecedented climate catastrophe.

A pet peeve of mine is the idea in media arts that interactivity is something positive, that it empowers the visitor. In this piece, if you participate too much, you die. Your presence makes the air more toxic for future participants. Art has always played with this sense of risk to elicit action, in this case, environmentally. But people could have a completely different interpretation, like a psychological one, and I would welcome that.

SFMOMA: How important is it that participants understand this background?

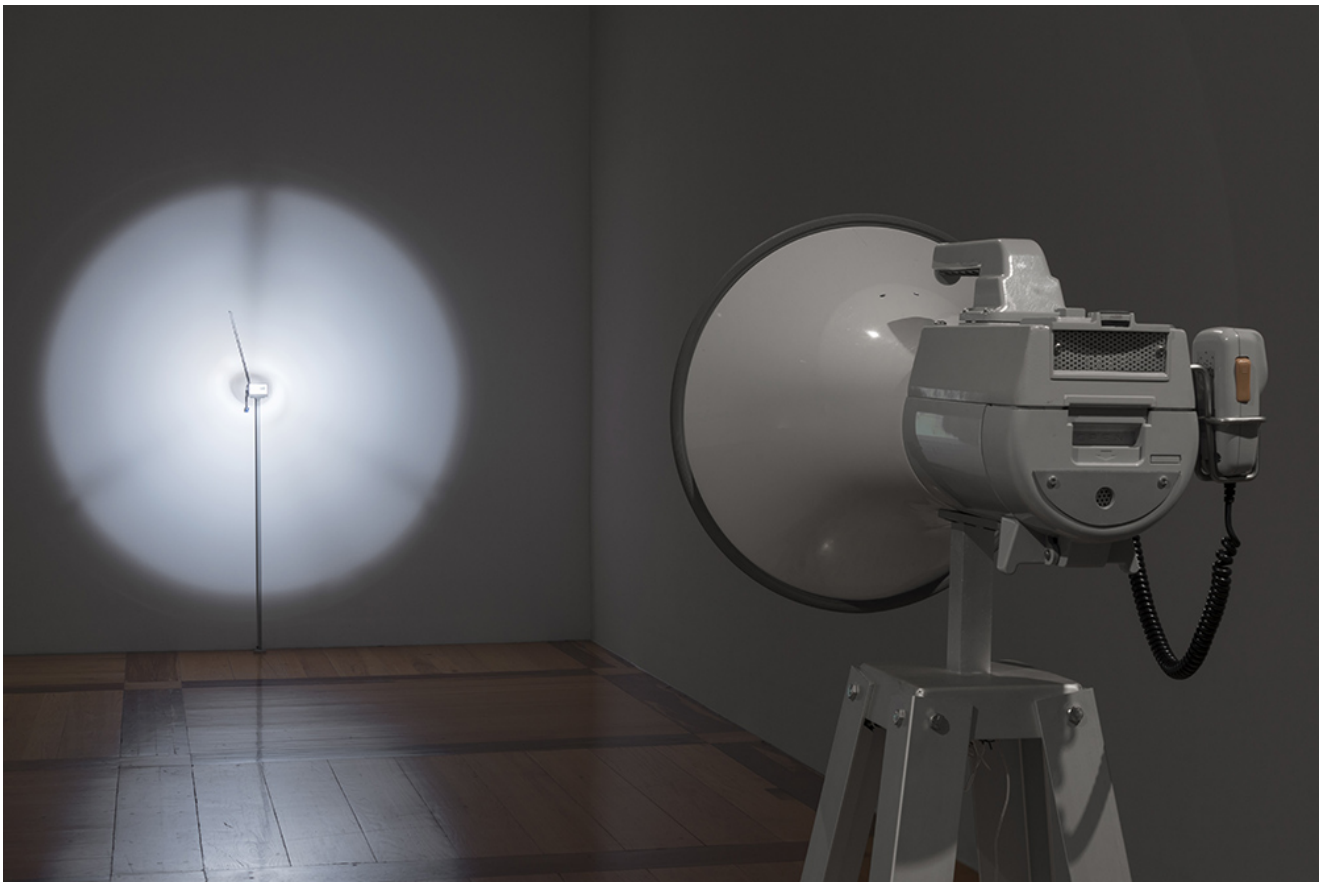
RLH: It's more about the experience. Even if you're not thinking about global warming or the concentration of carbon dioxide, you're smelling it. You're literally inside this experiment where your relationship to others gets tested.

A few years back, the CEO of Nestlé said water is not a human right. We had to ask ourselves about our communal resources. Who owns the air, water, and land we stand on? I hope some of those issues come out in the capture of people's breath.

SFMOMA: Did you test different kinds of bags?

RLH: The test of the bags came in an earlier piece, *Last Breath*, which is in SFMOMA's collection. That piece originated at the Havana Biennial. The bag size is the amount of air that the typical lung can eject. When we tried Cuban paper bags they didn't work, because

what you really want is a fried chicken brown paper bag. They're coated with plastic for juices. We had to import fried chicken paper bags into Cuba, and that's the type we use in *Vicious Circular Breathing*.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voz Alta and Prototype,* 2008 (installation view, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, Mexico, 2019); courtesy of the artist and bitforms, Max Estrella, Wilde, and Pace galleries; © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Spain; photo Roberto Ortiz Giacomám

VOZ ALTA

This commission for the National Autonomous University of Mexico memorializes the 40th anniversary of a 1968 student massacre by government forces in Tlatelolco, Mexico. The performance mixes memory of the event with live participation, using a megaphone placed on the site of the massacre to amplify uncensored voices of participants, including survivors, protesters, poets, and even children. A 10kW searchlight visible from a ten-mile radius beams the voice across the plaza as a sequence of flashes, brightening or dimming as a voice gets louder or quieter. Citizens could also tune into the university's radio station to listen to what the lights were saying.

RLH: Hundreds of people were murdered in the plaza in 1968, we do not know the actual number. For decades, the massacre was taboo, but 15 years ago the university took control of the site and commissioned artists and historians to create memorials and archives. We

can now speak freely about this episode although the guilty were never punished.

Artists I love, like Hans Haacke, Jochen Gerz, Rachel Whiteread, and Krzysztof Wodiczko, make their best artwork when it comes to remembering heinous chapters of history. For example, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz made a Holocaust memorial in Hamburg that disappeared over time. That was a real inspiration. I wanted to create an “anti-monument,” something that disappears, but that allows us to remember the voices of those lost within a contemporary context that recognizes ongoing massacres. I wanted to use the megaphone — the mechanism used in 1968 — to make voices visible.

SFMOMA: Was there any concern about the government’s reaction?

RLH: As its name implies, the university is autonomous, so there was no risk of interference. But they were aware of what we were doing. There’s a saying in Mexico: “There is no censorship until you get killed.” Fortunately, I’m still alive and uncensored.

SFMOMA: How will you bring the full impact into a museum setting?

RLH: By showing a prototype. We’ll have an antenna-like stand and megaphone on view. Inside the megaphone is a small xenon searchlight that will convert voice into light and FM waves that relay to a transistor radio at the back of the room. You can hear your voice retransmitted live by radio and light. That triggers one of the thousands of archive recordings from the Mexico City project. There’s also a documentary of the Mexico City performance.

SFMOMA: What do you want people to take away from the installation?

RLH: That the massacre is continuing. As is the fight.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Spiral,* 2008 (installation view, *Unstable Presence,* Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2018); courtesy the artist and bitforms, Max Estrella, Wilde, and Pace galleries, with the generous contribution of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal Collection; © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Spain; photo: François Maisonneuve

PULSE SPIRAL

This three-dimensional parabola-shaped spiral comprises 300-plus lightbulbs. Participants hold a sensor that records their pulse and displays it with the stored pulse rates of 300 people who came before them.

RLH: With *Pulse Spiral*, I was looking for a mathematical answer on how to most efficiently cover an area of three-dimensional surface with the minimum number of points of light. Fermat's equation says that if you put a cell every 137.5 degrees, you get a distribution that is most efficient in space. It's a common three-dimensional spiral pattern seen in plants.

SFMOMA: Was it simply a way to visualize the various heartbeats, or was there something else connecting the pulses to this shape?

RLH: The work of Vladimir Shukhov inspired it. In 2008, I made an artwork for the Bakhmetevsky Bus Garage in Moscow, which he engineered. As I studied Shukhov's work, I fell in love with his hyperboloid [a solid or surface having plane sections that are hyperbolas, ellipses, or circles] structures.

In terms of how it relates to biometrics, I needed to create a chandelier that would express the passage of time. You hold a pulse sensor, similar to what you might find at a gym. Your heartbeat recording goes to the lowest light bulb in the chandelier, and previous recordings push up one position. The shape allows people to follow that path up a spiral. We're discussing a shape change to the chandelier because SFMOMA's ceilings are not high. This project is adaptable to allow future curators to express any Fermat shape through the system.

Sometimes I think of media artwork as not so much part of the visual arts, but the performing arts. You've got a score, but that score gets interpreted by different orchestras in a different way. Sometimes we pretend we're crystallizing a moment in time, when in fact what the artist wants is for the artwork to have, on the one hand, a decent life, and then an honorable death.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence is on view April 25 through November 1 on Floor 7.

Join us for member previews on April 23–25.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Unstable Presence is co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal.

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Cristina Chan

Cristina Chan is the Managing Editor at SFMOMA.

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