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Installation view of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Spiral* (2008) at Haunch of Venison, New York



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Pulse Spiral
2008
Haunch of Venison



Installation view of *Make Out, Plasma Version* (2009) at Haunch of Venison, New York

LIGHT TOUCH

by Ben Davis

A wizard at merging slick technology with high-brow art, **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer** is one of the faces of the future of art. He was the first artist ever to represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale, in 2007. He has become the go-to guy for a certain type of contemporary monumentality. And he has just been officially baptized a rising art star with a show at Christie's Haunch of Venison gallery in New York.

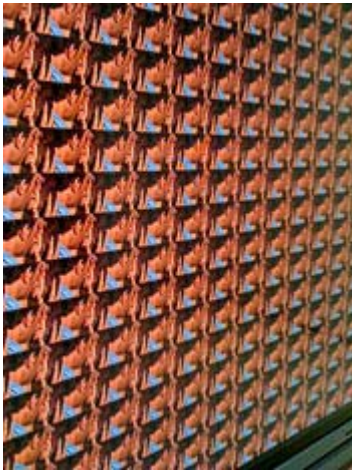
Peruse "Transition States," as the Haunch of Venison show is called, and you will see why Lozano-Hemmer's work generates such a buzz. To me at least, this seems less to do with any one dazzling work -- though dazzling works there are -- and more to do with the fact that he has found a formula that wrestles with some of the competing pressures on contemporary art.

Greeting you as you enter is *Pulse Spiral* (2008), a large, hanging chandelier made of light bulbs. Grip two handles stationed just below it, and the lowest bulb will begin to flicker on and off to the rhythm of your pulse. When you release your grip, the entire chandelier will light up, each bulb shimmering with the heartbeat of one of the last 300 people to try it (each new user crowds out somebody).

In a back gallery, you find *Make Out, Plasma Version* (2009), consisting of three room-filling plasma TVs, each covered with a mosaic of different images of couples staring at each other -- 2,400, to be exact. When someone enters the room, and stands in front of the screen, they begin to kiss. A remote control thoughtfully allows you to select whether you want to see man-man kisses, or man-woman kisses, or woman-woman kisses. When you leave, the kissers go back to just staring at one another.

As artworks, both of these pieces have a gee-whiz quality to them, stealing the seductive appeal of technology, unashamedly indulging in its pleasure. The danger of this, of course, is that the genre of "arty technology" easily descends into *SkyMall*-esque knick-nackery. Lozano-Hemmer, however, is adept at spiking his techno-wizardry with the kind of political, philosophical and poetic referents that the art world takes as its métier. Both *Pulse Spiral* and *Make Out, Plasma Version* appeal to the kind of utopian notion of "interactivity" that has become so pervasive in the art world -- he just gives it a libidinal, high-design twist.

Very much the same can be said about other works here, for instance, *Seismoscope 1: Francisco Sanches. Portugese (1550-1632)*, author of "That Nothing is Known" (2009), a drawing machine which scratches out an image of the face of the titular Portuguese philosopher, powered by the vibrations made by the footsteps of passersby. Or *Company of Colors, Shadow Box 9* (2009), a screen that projects back multiple images of whatever happens to be in front of it, broken down into various tiled mosaic patterns, each one using the colors palettes associated with various greatest hits from computer history, like the original Gameboy, or the Comodore 64.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Make Out, Plasma Version (detail)
 2009
 Haunch of Venison



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Seismoscope 1: Francisco Sanches. Portugese (1550-1632), author of "That Nothing is Known"
 2009
 Haunch of Venison



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
Company of Colors, Shadow Box 9
 2009
 Haunch of Venison



Lozano-Hemmer's flashy/brainy esthetic lends itself well to grandiose displays, and "Transition States" features documentation of a few of these that he has realized. Among them is 2003's *Amodal Suspension*, for which he created a work that translated text messages into flickering flights above the sky of Yamaguchi, Japan, a tribute to that city's association with fireflies. The more recent *Voz Alta*, similarly, was commissioned by Mexico City as a memorial marking the anniversary of the 1968 slaughter of students. It consists of a megaphone that users can speak into, with the volume of their voice being translated into the intensity of light from an associated spotlight. A functional prototype of *Voz Alta* is set up at Haunch of Venison, along with videos of folks giving it a whirl in Mexico City.

Both these latter two projects came to mind when viewing *Levels of Nothingness*, a performance that Lozano-Hemmer realized last month for the Guggenheim as part of the museum's "Works and Process" series, in happy coincidence with his Haunch of Venison show. *Levels of Nothingness* also translated user interaction into flashing lights. Its set-up involved a bank of state-of-the-art robotic stage lights, a passel of philosophy texts selected by philosopher Brian Massumi, and the participation of actress Isabel Rossellini (again, you see the technology-philosophy-spectacle axis Lozano-Hemmer mines). In my mind, it is *Levels of Nothingness* that tells the true tale of what is at stake with the direction that Lozano-Hemmer is laying out for art.

Before pronouncing on that, let's describe the experience. The genial Lozano-Hemmer began the performance by introducing the high-end stage lights that he was working with -- they are the type used for stadium rock shows and, he said, a dream-come-true to get to play with -- before ceding the floor to Rossellini, who sat at one side of the stage, the better to let viewers see the real star, which was the technology. The actress then recited a series of texts -- she read from cards, but the words also appeared on an enormous screen above the stage. Responding to the sound of her voice, the stage lights performed various operations, flickering, swooping around, flicking between different colors, bathing the room in colored mist.

Following each quote, Rossellini would pause. Lozano-Hemmer and his collaborator, Massumi, had divided their reading selections into various categories, with cryptic names like "Vague," "Everything," "Singular" and "Transformations." She would begin each new reading by stating the name of the category it belonged to, and the equipment had been trained to recognize this label, so that hearing it would cause the lights to reset before starting up in a new configuration. Each had a distinct light effect associated with it -- texts from the "Nothing" category were accompanied by well-defined white beams cutting through the darkness; "Levels of Nothingness" corresponded to a sort of nebulous vortex that was thrown upon the ceiling.

Following Rossellini's performance, a mic was passed around the audience so that viewers could themselves read philosophical snippets of their choice from the screen, and see how their own voice affected the various set-ups. To be honest, the effects -- though often lovely -- seemed to me to offer negligible variation. Perhaps you would just need to play around with the device for a while to get a sense for how you might really manipulate it with your voice.

What was most telling about the issues percolating beneath all this, however, was the choice of texts. Massumi, the philosopher (who, incidentally, reviewed Lozano-Hemmer's *Amodal Suspension* for *Artforum* back in '03), has made his career popularizing the work of French thinker Gilles Deleuze. Unsurprisingly, then, the texts included copious amounts of Deleuze and other people broadly associated with the French guru, along with a few artists like Robert

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Amodal Suspension* in Yamaguchi, Japan



Still from video about Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Amodal Suspension*



Installation view of prototype for Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta*, at Haunch of Venison, New York



Installation view of prototype for Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta*, at Haunch of Venison, New York



Still from video about Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta*

Irwin, as well as quotes from Frances Bacon, the painter about whom Deleuze penned a famous book (Just a few months ago, I wrote that Deleuze's writings were best considered the "philosophical equivalent of prog rock" [see "[Bacon, Half-Baked](#)," July 28, 2009], and then there I was, at an event that literally translated Deleuze's writings into something akin to "Laser Floyd!")

The rationale behind Massumi's selection of texts, Lozano-Hemmer explained to the crowd, was that he wanted to pick writings that rejected the "Newtonian" idea of color, in favor of a "phenomenological" approach. By this, he meant that the texts embraced the idea of color as an experience associated with the subject's embedded experience in the world, rather than as an objective, external matter of wavelengths, spectrums and so on.

What's notable about this formulation is that it is a false opposition -- or at least a very dated one. Contemporary cognitive philosophy has galloped along past such notions; brain scientists study the "qualia" associated with color-experience in relationship to mental processes, which presumably both relate to one's personal bodily states and are the function of objective, knowable -- though very complex -- conditions. (Incidentally, such a mangled attempt to make Deleuzian color philosophy relevant is not unusual for Massumi. Not so long ago, he was arguing that George W. Bush's "Terror Threat Level" chart's use of color was a sinister new attempt to colonize the citizenry's pre-subjective affects, wiring "government functioning directly into each individual's nervous system." Of all the things to hate about the Bush administration, its use of color is pretty low on the list -- current Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano was just on the *Daily Show* saying that there was thin evidence that the Threat Level actually affects the public at all.)

Consequently, I take it that the reference to "Newton," and the recourse of Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty, Benjamin, et al, has less to do with any real philosophical problem, and more to do with the practical dilemma that underlies art of the type Rafael Lozano-Hemmer makes. "Newton" here is actually a stand-in for rationalistic, technocratic thought. Lozano-Hemmer needs his art, which is technologically based, to somehow distinguish itself from "mere" technology in order to be worthy for an art crowd. Otherwise, *Levels of Nothingness* would just be a kind-of-cool (OK, very cool) karaoke light show. Massumi's philosophical snippets' function here has little to do with any real enlightenment they bring to the experience. What is important about them is their *rhetoric*, which associates the artwork with the insider cachet of esoteric philosophy, thereby lending it a sense of poetry and purpose it might not otherwise have.

But consider this: While the "anti-Newtonian" approach to experience professed by the texts in *Levels of Nothingness* seems intended to defend some kind of irreducible, rooted experience, the vision of the subject Lozano-Hemmer's work implies actually corresponds to the most dispiriting notions from cognitive philosophy, which paints the brain as just a big computer to be manipulated: The set-up in *Levels of Nothingness* reduces the personal input of distinct subjects to a collection of flickering electrical variations, their differences from one another set by a predetermined matrix of variables. In fact, *Levels of Nothingness* made me think that if you really followed this idea of art to its conclusion, what you'd get was a machine that just plugged directly into your head, producing esthetic "qualia" without any external, social relay -- the ultimate in "dematerialization" of the art object, I suppose. Something to think about.

Lozano-Hemmer, a pleasant presence with a truly infectious excitement about what he does, seems to be a little more aware of these stakes than his philosophical cohort. "Massumi calls his philosophy 'radical empiricism,'" Lozano-Hemmer told the crowd at



The artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer introducing *Levels of Nothingness* at the Guggenheim, Sept. 21, 2009



Actress Isabella Rossellini performing in *Levels of Nothingness* at the Guggenheim



The crowd during *Levels of Nothingness*



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Levels of Nothingness* at the Guggenheim

the Guggenheim. "If that is true, I am in the moderate wing of the radical empiricists." In that statement, you have his art in a nutshell -- enthusiastic about exploring the frontier of technological razzle-dazzle, which makes possible a level of collective experience beyond the traditional mode of art-making, and as a result also makes individual creative vision the appendage of a much larger apparatus. But then drawing back just a little, lest this enthusiasm carry us too far from what makes art recognizably human.

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Levels of Nothingness* at the Guggenheim



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Levels of Nothingness* at the Guggenheim