

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: He Blinded Me with Science

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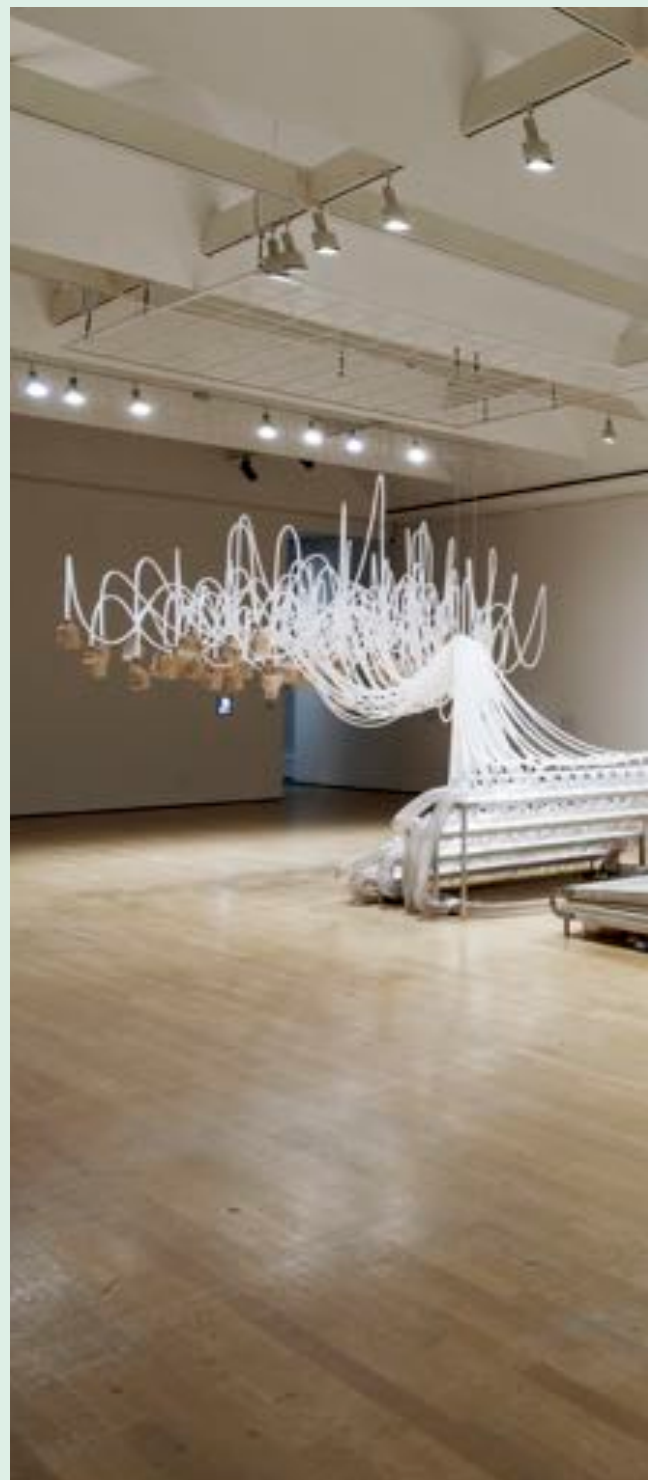
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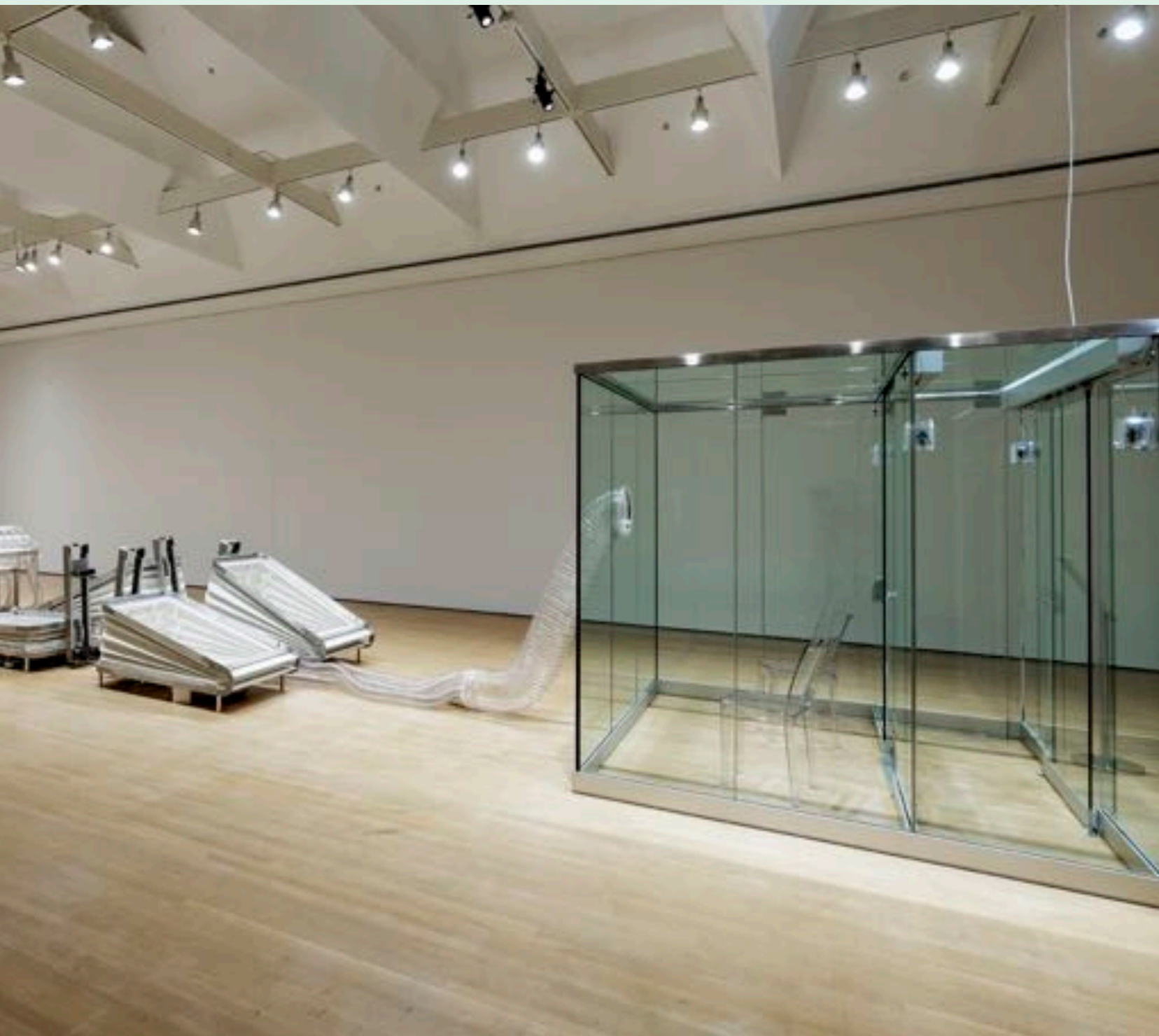
Edwin Janzen

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL
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In selecting a work for the rotunda at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (MACM), a curator must feel a little like a city manager choosing a suitable public square for the annual titanic Christmas tree. Indeed, the rotunda piece in Montreal artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's solo exhibition is something in this vein—a sort of upside-down Christmas tree of incandescent bulbs suspended from the ceiling: pulsating, twinkling. Titled *Pulse Spiral*, the installation scans the visitor's pulse, whereupon the bulbs take up its rhythm—first one bulb, then several, then all together. The pulse is then layered with the pulses of earlier visitors, and the array's oscillations grow more intricate.

In this exhibition, titled *Unstable Presence*, the imperative of the spectacle rears its head uncomfortably often, even as one also encounters some of this dynamic artist's remarkable works. Rudolf Frieling, media arts curator at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and Lesley Johnstone, curator and head of exhibitions and education at MACM, with François LeTourneux, associate curator at MACM, co-curated the exhibition, which, more than a mid-career survey, is presented as a reflection on the artist's work, its politics and poetics, according to the idea of "co-presence," a term that delineates the condition of "being with others" and the shaping of human behaviour. Co-presence is often invoked in discussions of asymmetrical power relationships, the interplay of gazes and bodies, and so on.





Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Vicious Circular Breathing*, 2013. Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2018. Glass room, bellows, tubes, 61 brown paper bags, manifold valve system.
© Rafael Lozano-Hemmer/SODRAC, Montreal/VEGAP, Madrid (2018). Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

With *Pulse Spiral*, it needs to be said, this combining and recombining of visitors' heartbeats is not really what social-interaction theorists mean by co-presence; and truly, the heartbeat-to-lightbulb connection today seems a bit dated (it's from 2008). But it is visually impressive, so perhaps we should not be surprised to encounter a better, subtler work tucked away from the rotunda in a little screening room.

In *Level of Confidence* (2015), Lozano-Hemmer uses open-source face-recognition software to formulate a poignant response to the police kidnapping and subsequent disappearance (murder), in 2014, of forty-three college students in Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico. On a screen displaying the students' mug shots, the visitor's own face is scanned and pictured onscreen, overlaid with a crude, linear and entirely inhuman caricature. Meanwhile an algorithm pairs this visage with a student whose face is most "like" the visitor's. The artist thus achieves two objectives: establishing a co-presence, however temporarily, between the visitor and a murdered student, while underlining the basic inhumanity of this popular security-sector technology, which the computer's admittedly freaky way of seeing makes evident.

On the second-floor, we encounter *Zoom Pavilion* (2015), a major installation also using face-recognition software. Visitors see themselves projected on all four walls; while, in step with the exhibition's theme, they watch the software graphically draw linkages between themselves and others in the gallery. The artist's intentions notwithstanding, *Zoom Pavilion* would not feel out of place at a security-industry tradeshow—in the DARPA booth, most likely. Indeed, what begins as socio-political critique, an abject lesson on the perils of the surveillance state, ends up merely as an opportunity to snap a few selfies—techno-fodder for our own narcissism (and, to be sure, free social-media exposure for the museum). Where *Level of Confidence* uses this technology to critique oppression and build solidarity, *Zoom Pavilion*, abetted by the museum visitors themselves, merely paints a disheartening portrait of twenty-first-century personhood.

As such, *Zoom Pavilion* is an insufficient reflection of its maker's more progressive and radical politics. Take *Voz Alta*, for example, a work created to commemorate the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City's Tlatelolco area. The artist invited visitors to voice their reactions via a megaphone connected to four searchlights, their beams subsequently projected across the city for millions to see. *Voz Alta* appears in *Unstable Presence*, but only at a remove, as documentation that includes a prototype of the original megaphone together with a documentary video. This is the artist at his best—not just political spectacle, but spectacularly political—but the tiny, monochrome video screen cannot do the installation justice. Obviously *Voz Alta* could not be installed indoors in the MACM galleries, but it deserved a separate screening room.

Perhaps the exhibition's strangest work, *Vicious Circular Breathing*, features a large, self-contained atmospheric system: at one end, a hermetically sealed Plexiglas chamber is connected via ducts to a bellows apparatus. This connects in turn to an array of tubes issuing into dozens of paper bags, which inflate and collapse continuously with the sound of ceaseless crumpling. Visitors may enter the Plexiglas chamber through an airlock, sit in chairs and breathe the same air

that numberless earlier visitors inhaled and exhaled. As pulmonary experiences go, lingering here is not the most pleasant experience: exterior sounds are muted, and the tepid air is stale and metallically sour, smelling like a box of old knives at a second-hand store.

Nonetheless, to experience *Vicious Circular Breathing* fully, one must take a turn inside and feel the confinement, the impulses toward claustrophobia and panic, the thoughts that gallop sequentially through the mind of anyone feeling trapped in a zero-sum system: contagion, pollution, climate change, sustainability and the question of whether there can really be a future.

Nearby is *Babbage Nanopamphlets*, an impressive cerebral reflection on the thinking of mathematician and inventor Charles Babbage. In his pamphlet, "On the Permanent Impression of our Words and Actions on the Globe We Inhabit," Babbage theorized that human speech, expressed as breath, "impressed" itself upon the atmosphere; if we could "rewind" or reverse-extrapolate the movements of atmospheric molecules, we might recreate the voices of people of the past. Working with Cornell University's NanoScale facility, Lozano-Hemmer printed millions of copies of Babbage's pamphlet onto elemental gold. Some are collected in a small vial in a vitrine. Others the artist circulated into the air via the museum's ventilation system for the unwary visitor to inhale (harmlessly, we are promised) and exhale.

The exhibition's circuit concludes with two sonic spheres. The first, *Sphere Packing: Bach*, is built from horizontal wooden bands, and situated in a dim chamber. Three people at once may enter the sphere via an opening. Within, thousands of little speakers are emplaced along each wooden band, as many in number as Bach's musical compositions. At first, all is quiet. Then a single speaker plays a Bach number: then a few more, and a few more. Soon, a wave of noise swoops across the sphere's interior, as Bach's 1,128 works begin to play simultaneously, a wall of sound rather like rushing water (if water rushes in Germany). Exiting the installation chamber, the viewer may glance behind the sphere, where cables from every last speaker are gathered together into a thick black braid and fed via a hole into a rear chamber. Here, the computerized array running the installation is showcased as a sort of secondary spectacle.

Impressive, to be sure—but little remains of Bach in this sonic experience. As a gesture, the expression of Bach's mighty corpus in a singular cacophony seems troublingly simplistic, and the viewer may well wonder what is the point of all this tech-wizardry (today like yesterday, this is the media artist's central conundrum).

In the exhibition's final room, however, a second, much smaller sphere hangs suspended by a cord. Constructed of white porcelain, *Sphere Packing: Wagner* very softly plays the Romantic composer's complete works (only 113 this time).

The visitor must push his/her ear almost up against the Wagner-sphere to hear, faintly, the Romantic composer's dramatic arrangements. Perhaps in contrast to how opera is normally experienced, here the composer's combined oeuvre is passed to us almost in whispers, like a secret portal to a more heroic age. Smaller and quieter, but with greater subtlety and allure, Wagner's sphere outshines Bach's.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Sphere Packing: Bach*, 2018. 1,128 channels of sound, speakers, maple, aluminum, screen, computer, custom-made electronics, hardware and software, 1/3. Collection Borusan Contemporary, Istanbul, © Rafael Lozano-Hemmer/SODRAC, Montréal/VEGAP, Madrid (2018). Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

Upon reflection, a more suitable theme than “co-presence” might have been the artist’s fascination with human expression—speech and text—its material nature and how it may migrate from one substance to another: from breath to sound (*Vicious Circular Breathing*), text to gold (*Babbage Nanopamphlets*) or music to noise (*Sphere Packing*).

And from noise to art: In one of the artist’s less imposing works, *Seismoscopes*, an automated, sound-inputs-activated XY plotter draws portraits of skeptical philosophers. On my visit, it was drawing the Persian Islamic scholar Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–11), who attributed causal relationships between phenomena to the will of God rather than to material interactions or reciprocity.

Amusingly, *Seismoscopes* rejects Al-Ghazālī’s teaching, and quite brazenly, because the plotter executes the image *exclusively* in response to material interactions—in this case, audience-generated sounds. Few visitors if any will know Al-Ghazālī or anything about him;

yet, at peak hours, a half-dozen visitors can be seen in a semicircle clapping their hands, seemingly celebrating the installation but in fact, they simply are eager to make the plotter keep drawing.

Even the simulacrum of applause is still applause, isn’t it? As long as the crowd is clapping—indeed, as long as there is a crowd—does it matter why they clap?

In bringing together this talented artist’s collection of works, the curators’ choices stray between works that, on the one hand, are deeply thoughtful and political, which advance the exhibition’s overall theme; and on the other, are tech-spectacles, seemingly tailor-made for the fiscal-theatrical imperatives of the public art museum in the neoliberal age. Here and there, a given work seems to serve both agendas—however, and perhaps reflecting the trajectory of many of our public museums over the past decade or two, we do get the feeling that one program pushes with somewhat more heft than the other.

Edwin Janzen is a writer, editor and interdisciplinary artist working in digital print, video and artist books. Born in Winnipeg, he completed his MFA at the University of Ottawa. Janzen currently lives and works in Montreal.