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‘It’s a closure’: the artist making an endless, erasing Covid-19 memorial

Mexico-born artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer invites people to contribute pictures of loved ones who died during the pandemic for an unusual installation

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: ‘For me, art has always been a good vehicle for mourning, but also a vehicle to express continuity.’ Photograph: Photo by Jonathan Dorado

David Smith *in Washington*

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Thu 28 Oct 2021 07.28 BST

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer caught the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic. The media artist became infected in March last year during a visit to New York, then unwittingly took the deadly virus back home to Canada.

"As far as I know, I am Patient Zero," he says by phone from Toronto. "I may have been the one that caused Canada to catch it because I was very early."

Lozano-Hemmer has an asthma condition "so it did get hairy for about five weeks", he says, but he was able to avoid hospital with the help of steroids. However, two of his friends, in Mexico and Spain, died from the virus. "It's been quite a time of loss and a time of mourning."

The 53-year-old has turned mourning into art with a work that opens at the Brooklyn Museum in New York on Friday. A Crack in the Hourglass is an ephemeral, ever-evolving Covid-19 memorial that confronts the question of how to commemorate a tragedy that has killed 5 million people with no end in sight.

This is how it works. Members of the public anywhere in the world can submit photos of loved ones lost to Covid-19 at acrackinthehourglass.net along with a personalised dedication. They can then watch via live stream or at the gallery as a modified robotic plotter deposits grains of hourglass sand on to a black stage to recreate the person's image.

Once the portrait is finished, it is slowly erased by gravity. The entire process - which takes about 20 to 40 minutes, depending on the complexity of the picture - is archived on the website, then the same sand is recycled into the next portrait, forming an endless collection of online memorials.

Photograph: Photo by Jonathan Dorado

"It gets laboriously and slowly drawn, one grain of sand at a time, and the slowness is part of it," explains Mexico City-born Lozano-Hemmer. "It's kind of like a mandala, trying to create this sense of memory and evoke, crucially,

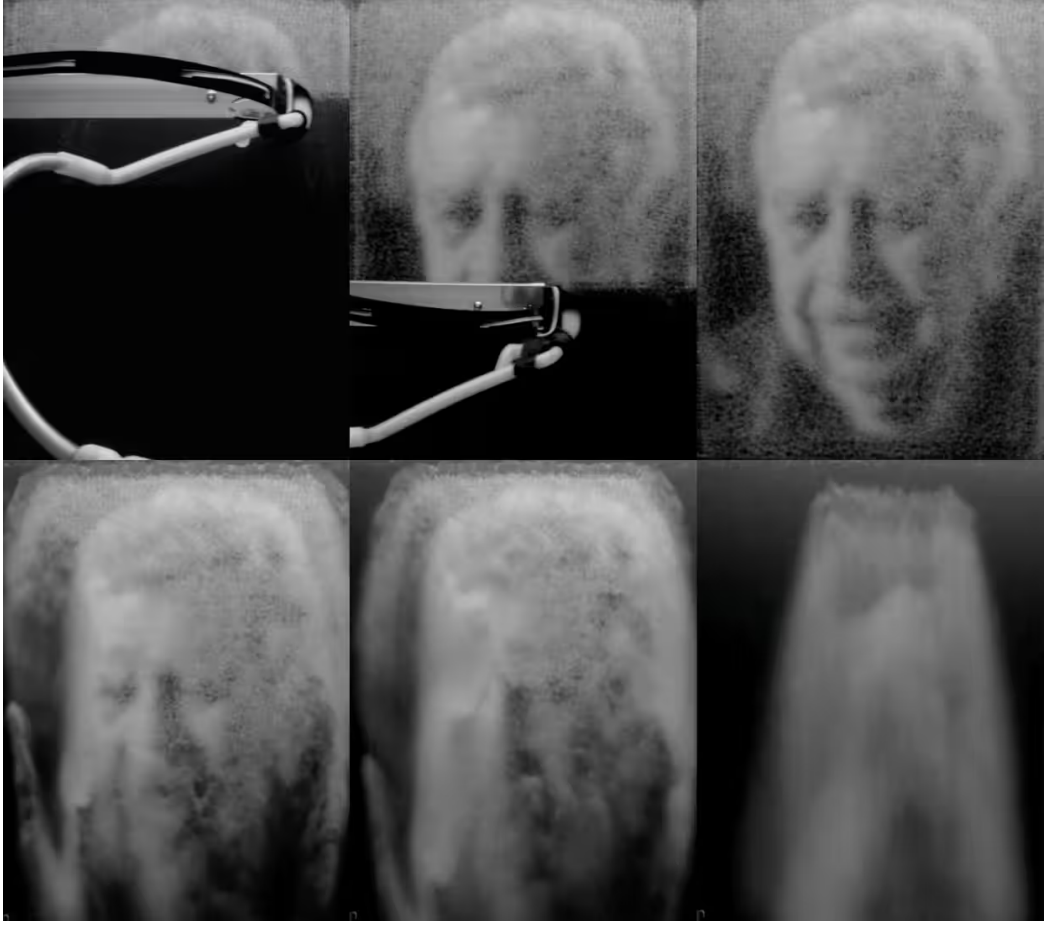
a closure because the piece disappears after it's been finished for a few seconds.

"We document it and make a web page for each and every participant but gravity pulls all of the sand. It gets recovered and then we reuse it for the future portraits. Importantly, some people said, 'Oh, don't you think it's kind of violent the way that the image disappears?' Well, that's exactly what a funeral is. It's a closure. It's this chance to see this image one last time and then help you understand that it's over."

He goes on: "For me, art has always been a good vehicle for mourning, but also a vehicle to express continuity. I like the idea that with this very same small amount of sand we've actually drawn hundreds and hopefully eventually thousands of unique likenesses. There's something about using that same sand that makes it express the sense of continuity and marvelling at how unique each person was."

A Crack in the Hourglass was commissioned by the Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City and has been running in a remote fashion since last November. The installation in New York, an early pandemic hotspot, will be its first live presentation. Visitors who make a submission while at the museum will be put to the front of the queue so will hopefully get to witness the image of their loved one take shape.

Lozano-Hemmer describes the work - a provocative contrast to soaring 19th- and 20th-century memorials of bronze, granite and marble that adorn many cities - as an "anti-monument". Its hymn to absence perhaps brings to mind the 9/11 Memorial's cascading waterfalls in the footprints of the twin towers in New York, or another recent coronavirus tribute by Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg: 700,000 white flags temporarily planted on the national mall in Washington to commemorate the American dead.



Photograph: Courtesy of Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo. Photo: Courtesy of the artist

Lozano-Hemmer cites a further example: Esther Shalev-Gerz and Jochen Gerz's monument against fascism, a 12-metre-tall lead column in Hamburg, Germany, which, between 1986 and 1993, gradually descended into the ground until it disappeared from view. "You go to visit today, you don't see anything. You just see a little plaque reminding you what happened here. You can stand on top of the monolith, which is now just a footprint under your foot. I love that. How else do you represent something as awful?

He continues: "I find that to remember somebody is not necessarily to cast their name in a monolith and just place it in public space. Sometimes an ephemeral intervention, something that disappears, helps you remember better. Sometimes these systems that allow us to create a unique interruption in the way that we experience time somehow help us affix or relate emotionally to a loss."

Lozano-Hemmer's work also arrives at a moment when statues of Confederates who fought to preserve slavery are being removed and monuments to problematic figures such as Christopher Columbus and Thomas Jefferson are under interrogation.

He comments: "Whenever we see a memorial or monument, we keep remembering that these are very specific stories being told. Right now in the United States there's such a conflictive and understandably revisionist history of who gets to be in those monuments because we're understanding that they come at the expense of exclusions and historical injustice.

"The anti-monument approach is something more fragile, something more relational, something that depends on your participation to exist. That's the

kind of work that I've been specialising in for the past 20 years."

But will the lessons of the pandemic itself endure? Lozano-Hemmer regards the global trauma as a rebuke to narrow nationalism. "Hopefully our sense of solidarity or empathy or sense of how things are interconnected will serve us into the future," he says. "But maybe that's a little bit naive. I do hope that we've learned something out of all this shit."

Among the organisers of the installation is curator Drew Sawyer. He says by phone from New York: "Monuments are usually geared towards the idea of nationalism and here it's a global project that allows access for people to participate no matter where they're located.

"At the end of the day, Rafael is deeply a humanist - he believes in humanity - and I think the project attempts to create a space that allows a sense of shared humanity even though, of course, we know that the pandemic has affected different countries, different communities unequally."

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: A Crack in the Hourglass is on display at the Brooklyn Museum in New York from 29 October to 26 June

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