

Taking the Pulse, 200 Hearts at a Time

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Park*, 2008, NYC

BY EMILY BAUMAN

In 1947, Ralph Ellison famously wrote, "Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well, and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death." There is a feeling that this state of marginalization described in *Invisible Man* has become pervasive in contemporary society. We battle on a daily basis to make our existence matter and to record our presence upon our landscape, but rarely do we take the time

to appreciate the fleeting and momentary beauty of our lives.

In the Fall of 2008, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer installed a work called *Pulse Park* in Manhattan's Madison Square Park. A place of leisure, off the beaten track, but enclosed within the city's daily chaos, and home of Danny Meyer's famous Shake Shack, where New Yorkers gather to slurp down amazing milkshakes and munch on gourmet burgers, the park offered Lozano-Hemmer a destination in which people would walk about without reason or purpose other than to interact within a public space.

Designed specifically for the park's oval field, Lozano-Hemmer created a self-contained installation composed of lights and human heartbeats to be stumbled upon, reveled in, and then left behind.

Pulse Park offered to turn passers-by into participants by recording their heartbeats and having them projected as rhythmic pulses of light onto the lawn together with the pulsing beams representing the two hundred other most recent visitors. The result, which Lozano-Hemmer describes as a "destabilizing experience because it totally surrounds you," syncopates the different beats that get locked into repetitions, which then offset each other to create different levels, like minimalist music. Coming together, singular rhythms "create something that is greater than the individual recording."

Lozano-Hemmer has been continually interested in creating interfaces in which connective—rather than collective—experiences can be had: experiences that depend on singularity and eccentricity rather than blanket or universal states. Nicolas Bourriaud suggests in *Relational Aesthetic*, "These days, utopia is being lived on a subjective, everyday basis, in the real time of concrete and intentionally fragmentary experiments... It seems more pressing to invent possible relations with our neighbours in the present than to bet on happier tomorrows." Lozano-Hemmer does not want to create an idyllic landscape, universal experience or "global village," only this temporary space for interpersonal relation and contemplation.

"The poetic interpretation of this piece that I enjoy is the *memento mori*," Lozano-Hemmer says: the idea that the recordings mark the presence and participation of the visitor as well as their disappearance—"a brief reminder of our ephemeral existence," he adds.

The basically romantic conception behind this work, which originally took form as *Almacén de Corazonadas*, 2006 (loosely translated to "Warehouse of Hunches/

Intuitions" but called *Pulse Room* when presented to English speaking audiences)—a room of 100 hanging bare light bulbs arranged in a grid throughout a floor of an old textile factory in Mexico—was inspired by hearing his unborn children's heartbeats when his wife was pregnant with twins. He became interested in "amplifying intimate readings" because it offered a form for sensing what makes us unique.

In its first version, participants could follow their own heartbeat as it moved sequentially through the room, either tracking the registration of their presence or choosing to get lost among the similar signs of other lives. *Pulse Park* implements *Pulse Room*'s concept on a larger scale and departs from this option of participant self-absorption, which disconnected individuals from one another in becoming mired in the specificity of their own rhythm. Immediately, the singular representation is subsumed in a cacophony that comes together as a figure, in which the beholder can no longer track how—or for how long—their personal rhythm participates as an eccentric note in the greater impromptu composition.

In *Pulse Park* the vanishing point of representation becomes temporal and responsive (interactive), rather than linear, material or traceable. The representation of presence becomes ephemeral since light represents the singular being and its uniqueness, as well as a general human quality of temporality and extinguishability.

In "Questions From a Worker Who Reads" (1935) Bertold Brecht wrote, "Great Rome is full of triumphal arches. / Who erected them? / ... Every page a victory. / Who cooked the feast for the victors?" Citing this poem, Lozano-Hemmer keeps in mind that dominant narratives gloss over the everyday, making our lives seem like invisible existences that dissipate into time.

As Brecht wrote, narratives of power are played out in and inscribed upon the landscape of public spaces through ceremonies, monuments and architecture. Lozano-Hemmer's "Pulse" works endeavor to reclaim, for a short time, a segment of the public sphere, making it celebrate and commemorate the momentary and fleeting; the people who are fundamental to society because they are the singular and eccentric elements that make it up.

Pulse Park was on view Oct. 24–Nov. 17, 2008, as part of *Mad. Sq. Art*. For a video of the work and of other related art works by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, visit www.lozano-hemmer.com.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Park* (2008). Madison Square Park, New York City. Photos by JAMES EWING, courtesy of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer