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REVIEWS

Heart Lights CATHY CAPLAN

Last November, on a very cold night, I walked over to Madison Square Park with a friend to see Rafael Lozano-Hammer's piece, "Pulse Park." After entering the park, I approached the piece, which was hundreds of theatrical spotlights placed at ground level, at the circumference of the lawn. Each spotlight shot a separate stream of light across the tips of the grass. At one end of the lawn was a set of handlebars with heart rate monitors, similar to the StairMaster type you hold on to in the gym. The idea was to hold the handlebars, and then watch the lights beat in time to your heartbeat. My friend had done this before. He loved doing it; he said, "When it's telegraphed, I feel its rhythm; I feel it because I see it." Four or five people are in line. My friend says, "It's short compared to last night." I say, "It was warmer last night."

As we waited, I watched everyone take their turn. The sensors clocked them for 15 seconds, then sent the pattern of their heart to the spotlights, and the spotlights flashed in time with each person's individual heartbeat. The sound of the generator also revved up and down in time with your heart. After each individual heart rate was projected, the lights went into chaos. The spotlights flashed in total disharmony. Each spotlight

was synchronized in rhythm with one of the heart rates of the last 100 users of the piece. In between the introduction of each new user's heart rate was a fifteen second intermission or recap, in which you saw the combined rates of the previous 100 users of the piece. Then the next person stepped up to the handlebars, and the spotlights flashed in perfect, focused unity to the beat of this new person.

Regarding the inspiration of this piece, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer said, "When my wife was pregnant with twins and you listened to their



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Pulse Park* (2008), Madison Square Park, New York City.
PHOTO BY JAMES EWING



heart beating, there was this beautiful syncopation like minimalist music. I wanted to expand that into something that could be appreciated visually."

First in line was a young man, alone, in his twenties. He put his hands on the bars, and we saw a fast, fluttery stream. He turned around to the rest of us standing in line, and said, "Sorry, I just smoked a cigarette." Next was a young couple on a date. He put his hands on the bars; it was a steady pulse – lots of space between the bright streams of light, clear differentiation between the two parts of the heartbeat. The girl looked up at him and said, admiringly, "Your heart is so strong."

A twelve year old watched everyone and then raced around the fountain like a puppy dog, determined to pump up his speed before his turn. He stepped up to the handlebars, and there it was flashing

across the lawn, quick fast beats like a bird.

And then it was my turn; I placed my hands onto the bars, waited. Though I'd been told that the heart's rhythm consisted of two distinct beats, I never fully appreciated it before—never connected that fact with my own heartbeat, until I saw it projected across the lawn. There it was: complex and alive. When your heartbeat is only inside of you, you can almost deny its existence, especially if feeling very fragile, marginal... that you are barely part of the living world. That was my feeling around that time. But seeing my heart boldly lit up, shot across the grass in strong clear beams, I suddenly felt myself present in the world—along with everyone else. I looked at my own heartbeat with pride, and I turned to my friend, "Come on, come on, tell me, it's a beautiful heartbeat."

A few days later I took a different friend of mine, an actress, to see the piece, and there was much more of a crowd—lots of repeat customers, like me, waiting to show off this piece to their friends. Everyone waiting in line patiently, it functioned like a friendship pact, watching each other's heartbeats. Many took the opportunity to see if they could control their own heartbeat. While waiting in line, they jogged in place; breathed deeply; smoked, and thought calm thoughts to see how much they could alter their pulse.

My actress friend was all amazement and delight and rapture. When her turn came, she said, "To see your own heartbeat like that across the grass. Subjective and objective at the same time. You were making the pattern. It's generated by you in a very personal way that you couldn't control..."

And I thought, yes, that is the big pleasure in the piece, despite small efforts to shape the beat, there it goes shooting out across the lawn. We've created something beautiful in the night, without any effort, by exposing the most essential, yet hidden, physical element of ourselves. We were all artists out there, playing with "Pulse Park," in Madison Square Park that night.