

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's show turns its gaze on the viewer

In a corner of the Gund Gallery's Buchwald-Wright Gallery last Monday, a conveyor belt was running.

"What is it?" my friend Maddie Farr '18 asked me.

We were at the opening of *Transition States*, the Gund Gallery's fall exhibition of 15 interactive artworks by Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. In our journey through the room, we had already learned that his installations demanded — sometimes even forced — our participation.

The white conveyor belt in "Please Empty Your Pockets" resembles the kind used in airport security systems: Objects travel through a box in the center of the track and leave through the other end.

Feeling adventurous, I took my phone from my pocket and sent it down the conveyor. When I removed it, the image of my phone stayed projected on the belt. It joined a collection of objects — keys, a toy cow, a necklace — whose images remained on the loop.

The first time Lozano-Hemmer exhibited the piece in Manchester, England, he said people left objects ranging from charms and crucifixes to sex toys and drugs.

"It was just a really funny revelation of what we carry with us," he said before Monday's opening.

But it also illuminated a central theme in much of the exhibit's work. "It doesn't really have any content," Lozano-Hemmer said. "If you don't participate, you don't see anything."

In Lozano-Hemmer's art, audience matters: Who views these works and how those people choose to participate impact the content of the pieces.

In "Surface Tension," a giant human eye on a screen rotates to keep the viewer perpetually in sight, using a sensor installed on the gallery wall. His "Zero Noon" is a digital clock that allows viewers to select representations of daily statistics that range from the tons of chewing gum produced to the number of high school dropouts in various locations.

Bringing the exhibit to a small college town like Gambier marks a significant change of pace for the works. Lozano-Hemmer said 260,000 people came to Mexico City's Museo Universitario Arte Contemporáneo for his last show, which closed in April.

"It was too overwhelming, the traffic," he said. "These pieces are intimate. Here, I think we'll have a chance for people to come in on a Wednesday morning and see it super quietly, spend time with it, maybe come back and see it again — see how it's changed over time."

Few people were in the gallery when Farr and I attended the opening. Alone in the rooms, I watched my friend

dance in front of “Airborne Projection-Relational Architecture 20,” a wall-sized projection of news articles whose words dissipated under viewers’ shadows. At “Sphere Packing” — five suspended spheres, each formed from speakers that played entire oeuvres of a single composer, including Schubert and Beethoven — we pressed our ears to each sphere, unburdened by other noises.

“I found myself circling around each piece,” Farr said. “Then I would hear the tiniest flicker of a song that sounded beautiful or intriguing to me, and I would get closer, and all the sounds would be fighting it. It was really a cool experience to just stand there.”

When the exhibition leaves the Gund Gallery on Jan. 2, it will take relics of Kenyon with it. Lozano-Hemmer designed “Microphone” to record all voices that speak into it. The system then responds with a random voice from a previous participant. Since the piece was last displayed in Basel, Switzerland, Gambier visitors will hear replies from the Swiss audience.

“So when this piece goes to Korea,” Lozano-Hemmer said, “the Koreans will hear you guys.”