

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

sculpturemagazine.art/rafael-lozano-hemmer

Maria Porges

February 17, 2022



San Francisco

SFMOMA

Truly experiencing Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's work requires us to pay close attention: to make our minds and imaginations available in ways dangerously eroded by the distractions of the Internet. This is somewhat paradoxical, considering the technological complexity of his installations. The seven pieces in "Unstable Presence" ([on view](#) through March 6, 2022) represent the extraordinary range of his ideas, inventions, and interests—from sound sculptures addressing voice and music to public art, digital fountains, and works exploring text and its legibility and the history of sound. Some embody a near-magical realization of applied scientific research. That so much is packed into a few small galleries is a testament to the artist's ability to devise extraordinary experiences for viewers.

Lozano-Hemmer's work is both participatory and performative. Like Olafur Eliasson, he has an unerring instinct for the drop-dead spectacular, as exemplified by *Sphere Packing: Bach* (2018), the last in a series of pieces exploring the complete works of different composers. A

sphere formed of ringed shelves, large enough to stand inside, has been fitted out with 1,128 speakers, each of which plays one of the 1,128 compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach. Tiny but powerful, the speakers are programmed in waves; one begins with a partita or fugue, to which hundreds of others are quickly added, swelling to a deluge of vocal and instrumental sound that is both beautiful and cacophonous, like all the languages of the world being spoken at the same time.

In the achingly beautiful *Call on Water* (2016)—a mysterious, oracular sculpture in the form of a rectangular fountain of cold vapor—an excerpt from a poem by Octavio Paz emerges word by word. The patterns of tiny white jets remain only for a moment, like a recitation, lingering in memory as mere ghosts: a reminder, as Lozano-Hemmer tells us, of the power and the ephemerality of language.

It's possible to spend just a few distracted moments with *33 Questions per Minute* (2000). The queries that it offers (created from a database of grammar and vocabulary) will never repeat themselves; it would take 3,000 years to view all 55 billion. *33 Questions* appears here in two forms: the original version from 2000, consisting of a loose cluster of 21 tiny, wall-hung LCD screens connected by a tangle of cords, and a large projection on a screen wall in the entry area of the show. As the title indicates, the questions appear and change over quickly, essentially at the very limit of our ability to read them, let alone interpret the generally nonsensical content. Written in Spanish as well as English, the rapid-fire texts create a sensation not unlike that of being in a foreign country where you don't speak the language, barraged by fleeting impressions of meaning.

Lozano-Hemmer describes this experience of uncertainty as “turbulence,” but it can also be felt as a kind of suspension, away from the aggravation of being constantly tethered to social media and the miasma of intense anxiety caused by the events of the last 18 months. Rather than offering an escape from complication, however, Lozano-Hemmer seems to be suggesting that we can learn to live productively with the instability of modern life.