



BEAT CONNECTION

WE ♥ RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER'S *PULSE TOPOLOGY*

BY EMILY COX

The summer solstice has just passed; our days are now getting shorter, with a little less sunlight from now until the darkest days of December. A season for me to be grateful for the light, and appreciate the way it shapes our world.

A good season, then, for an art installation composed of over 3,000 light bulbs, suspended from the ceiling in a dark room, in rolling, rollicking waves, an inverted topology in which you may see reflections of the land surrounding us: the soft hills of our neighborhoods, the dramatic curves of the Ozarks, the rise of the Flint Hills to our west.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Pulse Topology* opened at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art on June 25. I was invited for a sneak peek as they finished installing the exhibit the week before opening. This immersive sound and light exhibition is grounded in your heartbeat, and the heartbeats of all who visit.

Lozano-Hemmer, a Mexican-Canadian artist based in Montreal, has coordinated the planning and installation of this exhibit remotely, as pandemic travel restrictions remain tight.

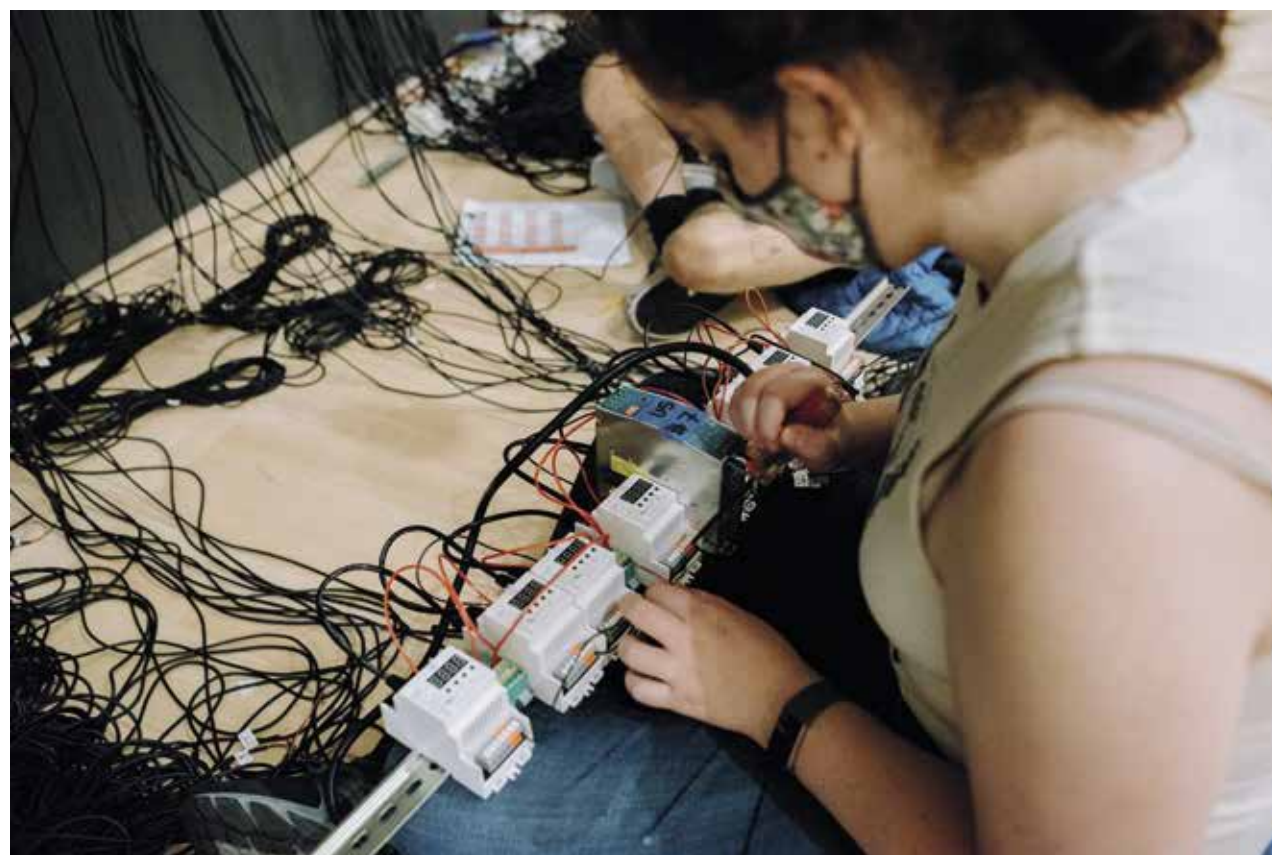
Watching Kemper staff and volunteers follow instructions to install a massive grid of lightbulbs, with thousands of feet of cabling running down the walls, felt reminiscent of Sol Lewitt's wall drawings. Lewitt created a series of large-scale drawings by writing instructions for them, which are followed by others, who draw them on gallery walls to this day. Lewitt believed the idea made the art, rather than the execution.

I can't say whether Lozano-Hemmer is of the same mind, but the art he conceived has been born out here by the hands of many following his instructions. Lozano-Hemmer's computer model is being made manifest, with each bulb placed to its plot point on a grid, hung from a specific height, ready to be programmed individually.

When you enter the gallery—with new, dark gray walls for this exhibit—you'll find yourself under a canopy of bulbs, shimmering with pulses, and surrounded by the sound of gently throbbing bass from



“THAT SINGLE BULB BEGAN TO BEAT ALONG WITH MY HEART, AND THAT BEAT EXPANDED TO THE SURROUNDING BULBS, GROWING IN RADIUS, UNTIL THE ENTIRE SPHERE IN MY VIEW ABOVE ME PULSED WITH MY OWN HEARTBEAT. I FELT ALIVE! RADIANT! QUITE LITERALLY ILLUMINATING THE ROOM WITH THE LIGHT AND RHYTHM OF MY BODY. I AM THE GOD I WAS WAITING FOR.”



TRAVIS YOUNG

sands of bulbs in the room. As new visitors come in, your heartbeat will be amongst those pulsing above them.

Pulse Topology is the latest, and most ambitious, chapter in Lozano-Hemmer’s *Pulse* series, which began over 15 years ago. The moment of inspiration that began this series came in an obstetrician’s office, as Lozano-Hemmer’s wife received an ultrasound for their twins in utero. He requested a second ultrasound be brought in, so they could hear both heartbeats at once. That profound experience led him to create a dynamic series of interactive exhibitions involving heartbeats, collected and layered together and shared back on a large visual scale.

In *Pulse Topology*, we see our human biological systems through the prism of our ecological systems, as he creates a topology composed of our heartbeats. It illuminates a question: what landscapes do we create together? It also serves as a reminder that we are an integral part of this landscape, not something apart from it. We light up the land we live on: it is up to us exactly how we do that. What impression do you want to leave on this land?

Even as the Kemper team was finishing up wiring in the final set of light bulbs, the

subwoofers. You may find your way to one of three sensor stations: small black conical devices suspended from the ceiling by their

cord. You may scan your hand, and using photoplethysmography (PPG) technology, it will read your heartbeat. Just as you are in

awe of your own heartbeat lighting up the sky above you, it dissipates, and your heartbeat joins the mass of others in the thou-

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experience of being underneath the canopy of bulbs, and participating in the technological dialogue between the bulbs and my body, was goosebump-raising.

As I scanned my hand, I looked up at the bulb above me, waiting in what felt like a sacred, supplicant posture (Are you there, God? It's me, Emily). Then that single bulb began to beat along with my heart, and that beat expanded to the surrounding bulbs, growing in radius, until the entire sphere in my view above me pulsed with my own heartbeat. I felt alive! Radiant! Quite literally illuminating the room with the light and rhythm of my body. (I am the god I was waiting for.) A brief, almost-mystical experience that left me buzzing with delight as I looked up at the thousands of other heartbeats shaping the sky above me.

We shape the world around us. Octavia Butler wrote, in her all-too-prescient speculative novel *Parable of the Sower*: "All that you touch / You change. All that you change

/ Changes you."

Being able to actively change this exhibit—contributing the beat of our body's pulsing blood—gives us the opportunity for us to be changed by it. After you walk away, you are still a part of this. Your heartbeat will live on in those bulbs for other visitors to see. Sharing that part of yourself is a gift, a conversation, a collaboration, it is leaving a mark on the world. It is joining the chorus. You are now in the chorus. Your voice, your body, your rhythm is an essential part of the whole. Let that change you, too.

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Pulse Topology is on view at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art (4420 Warwick Blvd.) from Friday, June 25, 2021 to Sunday, October 24, 2021. Admission is free. Visit their website for information on artist talks, panels, meditations, and other programming for this exhibition. P

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