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Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Cloud Display (2019). Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley

The interactive art of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: psychic resonance, surveillance and a murmuration of lights

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“They stole my face,” shouts a ten-year-old boy into a microphone, before stomping away.

We are in the Rafael Lozano-Hemmer exhibition Atmospheric Memory at the Powerhouse in Sydney. The boy’s photograph was taken as soon as he entered the exhibition and then publicly projected onto his shadow.

Like the social media it replicates, the exhibition content is a product of its users – which can feel like theft.

The main exhibition room, Atmospheres, contains a number of different works including a water-spray wall. The mist coming from the wall is a response to changes in the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere over time. It forms cloud-like visual texts whenever audience members speak into a microphone.



Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Cloud Display (2019). Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley.

On the walls and floor of the main exhibition room, there are projected outside images – a moving feast of text and data. These images and data represent the chaos of the digital world and the ubiquity of digital tracking technologies in urban environments.

All this digital imagery and scrambled text is a bit manic and unsettling.

Some of these elements from the Mexican-Canadian artist Lozano-Hemmer have been separately exhibited in Australia and internationally before. But brought together, the frenetic activity of so many competing elements in one room compromises their individual effect, especially as some recording components were not working on the day.



Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Text Stream II. Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley.

Themes of surveillance

The main work in the exhibition is called Zoom Pavilion. A tower supports 24 robotic cameras, which track visitors as we enter the space and report our appearance to the projectors, throwing our images onto the floor and the walls around us.

This work is a collaboration between Lozano-Hemmer and the pioneering Polish projection artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, and presents Wodiczko's well-known theme of surveillance.



Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Zoom Pavilion. Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley.

Read more: Not Big Brother, but close: a surveillance expert explains some of the ways we're all being watched, all the time

This type of art is what Lozano-Hemmer calls “relational architecture”, invoking the ideas of engagement and social experimentation (the “relational”) and the built environment.

He has also described these works as “platforms for public participation” and “technological theatre”: artworks that try to augment public space with gigantic interactive projections designed to bring people together in a playful way.



Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Field Atmosphonia. Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley.

In another room, Field Atmosphonia is a dynamic light display accompanied by 3,000 different sound channels, including field recordings of insects and hundreds of types of birds. It is the complexity of the natural world transposed into the digital.

Imagine a murmuration of lights accompanied by sounds. Visitors walk in confused patterns, in sync with the pulses of light. Several toddlers, enchanted by the sounds and lights, run frantically away from their parents and back again.

Lost connections

This Sydney version of the show incorporates an eccentric variety of objects from the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences' collection.



Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, The Greenhouse featuring the Edison tin-foil phonograph. Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley.

These objects include a boomerang, two terrariums with plants and rocks, three glass-blown bush-plum shapes by artist Yhonnie Scarce and, in the foyer, a slow-moving photographic panorama of late-19th-century misty Blue Mountains from the collection of Charles Kerry.

The connections between these collection items and Lozano-Hemmer's work are hard to understand, except that they all connect to the atmosphere in various ways ... at a stretch. The inclusion of the boomerang and glass shapes smacks of First Nations tokenism.

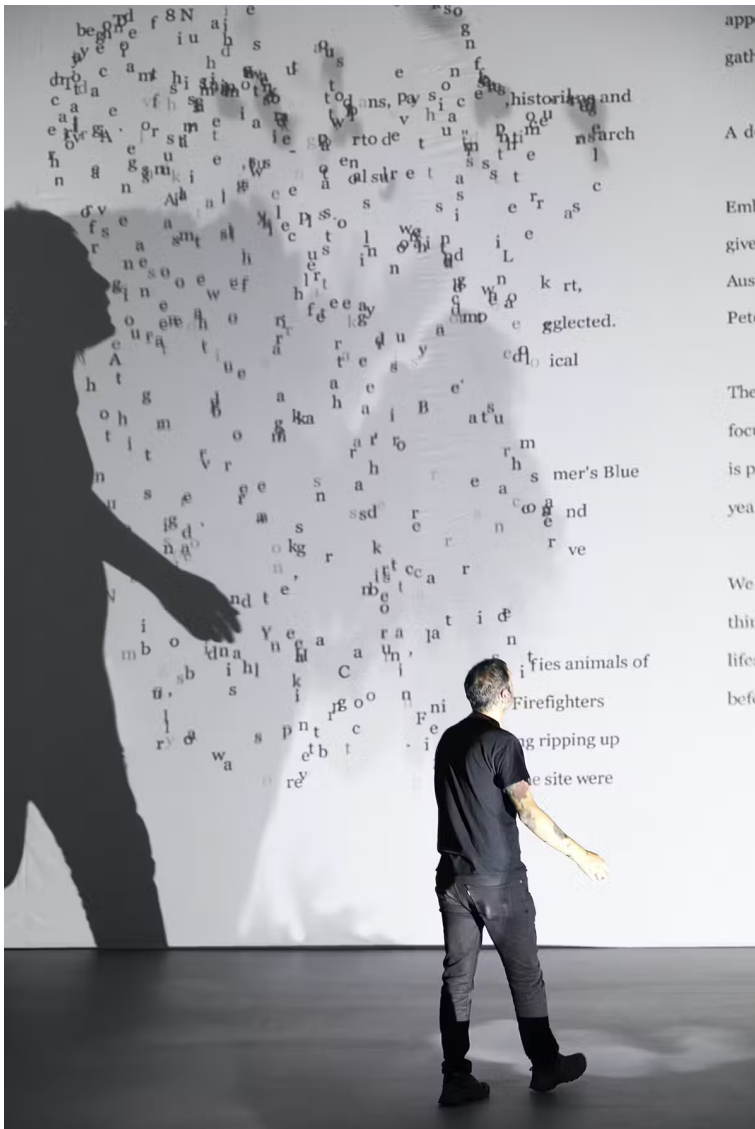
Recreated, reformed and re-presented

The overarching idea for Atmospheric Memory is that voice activation and image recording can be stored then endlessly recreated, reformed and re-presented to the audience.

Lozano-Hemmer attributes the origins of this idea to British 19th-century engineer and inventor Charles Babbage, who claimed perfect recollection is a calculation of the movement of all air molecules and could be rewound to reveal hidden voices.

Lozano-Hemmer has repositioned Babbage's interest in psychic resonance and spirit reflection alongside his technological forecasting.

Read more: *What was the first computer?*



Atmospheric Memory by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Airbourne Projection. Photographer, Zan Wimberley @zanwimberley.

It is arguable that Babbage's ideas really were the precursor to the digital interconnection and uncanny surveillance tactics of the 21st century, as suggested by this exhibition. But Babbage also fell for the late-19th-century mystic allure of life-death illusionism, replayed here as the virtual/real dichotomy.

Both elements (illusionism and technology) are in play in the exhibition, but are not resolved.

Still, the rooms were packed with families enjoying the interactive elements. Even the kids who were worried about their stolen faces seemed to be having a fun time.

After pointing out the central problem of the show, the same boy returned to the mic to shout "Bye!" as he scurried off after his mother.

Atmospheric Memory is at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, until November 5.