

# EYE WEEKLY <sup>15</sup> years

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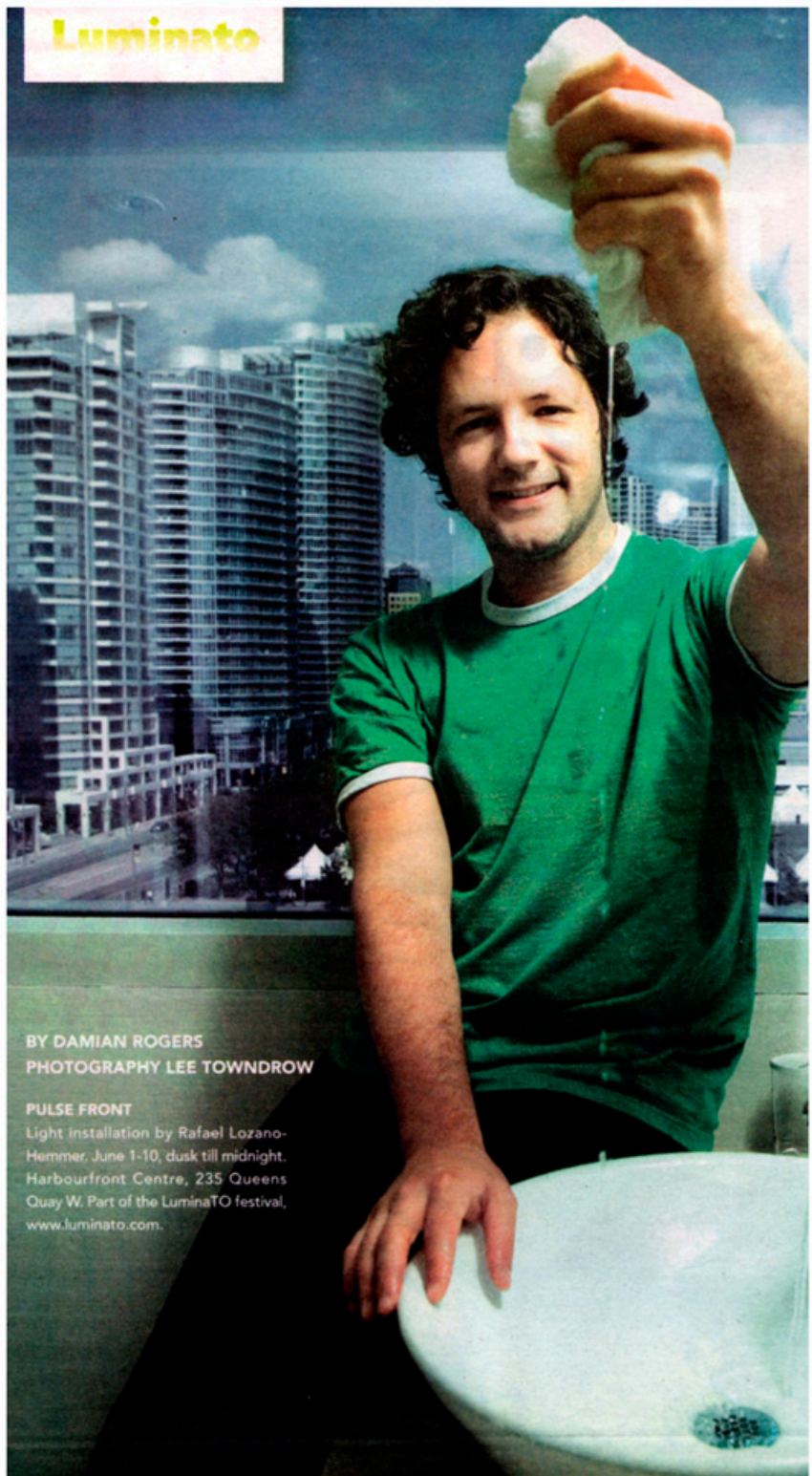
# Luminato

Mexican-Canadian artist  
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer lights up  
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# Pulse of the city

Mexican-Canadian artist  
Rafael Lozano-Hemmer  
turns on Toronto's heart  
light by blurring the lines  
between science, sculpture  
and theatre at LuminaTO



BY DAMIAN ROGERS  
PHOTOGRAPHY LEE TOWNDROW

#### PULSE FRONT

Light installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, June 1-10, dusk till midnight.  
Harbourfront Centre, 235 Queens  
Quay W. Part of the LuminaTO festival,  
[www.luminato.com](http://www.luminato.com).

If you see large beams of light emanating from the harbour this week, you might assume that they're trumpeting the arrival of a new shopping mall or crap hair band. You would be wrong. In fact, what you'll be looking at is a projection of the city's heartbeat.

Montreal-based artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is premiering a new light installation as part of the inaugural, city-wide arts festival LuminaTO called *Pulse Front* — but he needs you to show up for it to work. The interactive piece is made up of 10 metal cylinders that detect and record the heartbeats of passersby who choose to grab on to them, thereby activating a trippy, personalized light show that can be seen clear across town.

"We just did a project with this kind of heartbeat interface, measuring vital signs," Lozano-Hemmer says over the phone, "and the degree of intimacy that this kind of project generates is remarkable for something that is so large and spectacular and public. It creates a really interesting tension. Typically when we think of these lights, we think of the opening of a new stadium or some rock concert, or worse, in Europe anyway, you think of anti-aircraft surveillance, and Nuremberg Nazi rallies and so forth. So whether it's military or corporate, the use of this technology is always to impose a certain kind of reading or certain kind of celebration — usually to get people to consume something. We invert that."

Lozano-Hemmer is clear that *Pulse Front* is an experiment, one that relies entirely on the interest of others. "We are humbled by the fact that if people don't participate then those lights do not move at all — they don't exist, there's no show. We personalize that space through people's very intimate biometrics. It asks, how does my heartbeat relate and get lost with everyone else who is participating and who has participated in the past?"

Experiments are nothing new to Lozano-Hemmer, who moved to Montreal in the '80s to study chemistry at Concordia before beginning his art career in the early '90s. The child of nightclub owners in Mexico and Spain, he was exposed to the world of musicians and artists at a young age, but

science was his first love and it continues to inspire him.

"When I did chemistry, it was something I was really passionate about," he says. "I still am, but all of the things that attracted me about chemistry — the experimental nature of it, the idea of being able to discover new things or whatnot — all of that stuff can also be found in the humanities. I know that's a totally cheap comparison, but I do believe that a lot of what I'm doing now is about mixing things up and watching the reaction take place."

While still a student at Concordia, Lozano-Hemmer was the co-host and producer of a weekly radio show called *The Postmodern Commotion* on Montreal's CKUT, where he explored ways of presenting complex ideas through electronic sound pieces. From there, he and his friends began to create multimedia performances in galleries that they dubbed "technological theatre." But Lozano-Hemmer grew increasingly excited about the possibilities of more unpredictable situations: "I began working with interactive environments, without trained actors and dancers, where the public is the actor."

Science and technology play a major role in many of his pieces, and in *Pulse Front* in particular. "Our sensors detect subtleties in the heart curve, not just how fast, but characteristics that make your heart different than others.... Most people's heart is more or less going at the same rate — you get this rhythmic pattern, but with slight differences."

When describing the resulting composition, he invokes the names of minimalist composers like Glenn Branca and Steve Reich. I ask him if he's going to see *Book of Longing*, the Philip Glass adaptation of Leonard Cohen's most recent book of poems and drawings that's also featuring at LuminaTO. It turns out he's only going to be in town for a couple days, because he's got to get out to the Venice Biennale, where he is presenting a sound installation that turns audience members into walking radio antennae.

One of the goals of the LuminaTO festival is to set up more collaborations like *Book of Longing* among different artists

who have never had the opportunity to work together before. Lozano-Hemmer has already let the LuminaTO organizers know that he'd be thrilled to have the chance to do something with the Kronos Quartet. "They said, 'Oh, we might be able to arrange that.' That would be amazing."

Collaboration is key to all of Lozano-Hemmer's art, because he must work with teams of computer programmers and staging companies to put each project together. And when a work is finished, he becomes a member of the audience.

"One thing that gives me a lot of pleasure is to see how people make it their own — to be surprised by people's reactions to the work, to see what they come up with," he says. "Will some people see this as a totally cheesy romantic operation? Probably some will say [dismissively], 'Well, my heart is being beamed 50 kilometres into the sky.' Others will see it as a social project where you get to talk to people you don't know because you're sharing this experience. You finally promenaded down your city not to go to work or to your home. You're spending time in your city doing something other than shopping. I don't really know how people will react and that is really the fun part."

In the last 15 years, Lozano-Hemmer has become a major international artist, exhibiting in countries all over the world, including Switzerland, Spain, England, Australia, China and Japan. Curiously, *Pulse Front* marks one of his first major exhibitions in Canada. "I am supported by the Canada Council," he says, "but I'm supported to show something in Holland or Japan... anywhere but in Canada it seems. But hopefully that's beginning to change."

Luckily for us, this neglect does indeed seem to be coming to an end. In addition to *Pulse Front*, Lozano-Hemmer is showing a smaller installation through the AGO at the TD Centre and a little piece of his is featured in the group show "Auto Emotion" now at the Power Plant.

With a laugh, he says, "In Toronto I'm doing small, medium and large!"

