

Arts

Let this dazzling art project be a reminder: Toronto still has a 'Pulse'

Pulse Topology needs your heartbeat to work, and local healthcare workers were the first to 'donate' theirs

[Leah Collins](#) · CBC Arts · Posted: Oct 27, 2021 10:30 AM EDT | Last Updated: October 27, 2021



Pulse Topology runs at The Bentway in Toronto through Oct. 31. Tickets are pay what you can. (Jonathan Gazze)

It's not visible from the highway, or the streets and sidewalks below. But it's there, glowing in a concrete chamber below the Gardiner Expressway. [Pulse Topology](#), a sound-and-light installation by the Mexican-Canadian artist [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#), opened in Toronto Oct. 2, and it remains on view through Halloween. The work is, in form, a rippling veil of electric light — 3,000 lightbulbs that have been strung from the ceiling of an erstwhile storage facility near the Bentway. But like the proverbial fallen tree that makes no sound if there's no one in the forest to hear it, these lights won't shine without an audience.

The artwork is, in a sense, powered by people. To create the rhythmic light and sound it emits, the installation is equipped with touchless biometric sensors. These illuminated devices, which dangle from above like the bulbs, are capable of reading a pulse from an outstretched palm. The choice to engage is yours, but if you do, your heartbeat will pump along with a chorus of thousands, its singular tempo reflected in a single corresponding bulb.



An example of one of the touch-less sensors inside Pulse Topology. (Jonathan Gazze)

Despite being the creator of the work, Lozano-Hemmer had only just experienced it for himself when CBC Arts reached him late last week. "Nothing prepares you for walking into the actual space," says the artist, who oversaw the project from his home in Montreal. Conversations about bringing the work to the Bentway began six months ago, he explains, and since he was in lockdown like everybody else, his execution of the piece was conducted remotely.

"It was very COVID-style," he laughs, and the project itself also has a certain timely quality. The pandemic is still with us, but in Toronto at least, it's now possible to gather in public — to [book a timed ticket](#) to an art installation, for instance. The whole idea of community coming together is visualized through Pulse Topology's symphony of lights, but there's another chord running through the piece, one that acknowledges the human loss of the last year and a half.

After 3,000 visitors pass through the installation, the first heartbeat is erased, making room for another — and another, and another. "I think that art is a good vehicle to mourn and help us remember our ephemeral presence," says Lozano-Hemmer. "It's kind of like a memento mori, a reminder that we are here for only a little time."



Because of COVID-19, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's studio developed a contact-less tracking system that can read a visitor's pulse using pre-existing medical technology. (Jonathan Gazze)

Those ideas give the installation a certain resonance in the COVID era — and that's intentional, as Lozano-Hemmer explains — but the artist also acknowledges that the same themes run through every iteration in his Pulse series, a body of work that began with *Pulse Room* (2006), another interactive installation that represents human heartbeats via 300 (versus 3,000) twinkling lights.

That piece is part of the collection at the [Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal](#), but the various forms and phases of *Pulse* have been presented internationally, from New York to [the Venice Biennale](#) to Australia. And at the same time that *Pulse Topology* is viewable at The Bentway, another version of the same installation is showing at the Kemper Museum of Art in Kansas City. The Toronto piece has been executed at a grander scale than that one, and Lozano-Hemmer also notes that there's a special quality to staging the work inside an industrial space. The venue is a storage cubicle belonging to Exhibition Place, a room most people in Toronto probably didn't even know existed.

"For the past 30 years, I've been very interested in working in public infrastructure locations like [this]," he says. "I've always found enormous beauty in them."

"I also think that a place like this — specifically after COVID — is interesting because it's about coming together, right? After being in social distancing for so long now, we've come together to see this artwork. ... And it helps us. It helps us feel less lonely, perhaps, or it helps us feel in relation to others. I think that that's something that we're really missing after COVID."



Visitors to Pulse Topology in Toronto interact with the installation's array of lights. (Jonathan Gazze)

Lee Steel was one of the first in the city to visit Pulse Topology, and her voice quivers when she remembers how the experience of seeing — and hearing — her heartbeat brought her back to the harder days of lockdown. "It was so special to look up and see that one little lightbulb," says Steel. "I still get really emotional. Even though that one bulb didn't reflect that much light, when it was joined by all these others, it lit up the darkness."

Steel works as a family advisor for the Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto. And she was one of several healthcare workers from the organization who were nominated to contribute their heartbeats, so to speak, at the installation's opening earlier this month. The initiative, called Heart of the City Champions, was brought about through a partnership between the presenters (The Bentway and Exhibition Place) and [HeART Lab](#), a CAMH research team that studies the links between public art and community health and wellbeing. Visitors to the installation are asked to answer a HeART Lab survey upon exiting, and [the results are updated on their website](#) each week. According to Allison Crawford, founding director of HeART Lab, that information may be used by organizations, such as The Bentway, to advocate for further public-art programming.

When her team learned of The Bentway's plans to bring *Pulse Topology* to Toronto, they suggested the partnership. "A lot of the things we believe about the connections between art and well-being, art and community, art and relationships, I think are demonstrated in this piece. They come alive in the piece," says Crawford. And their Heart of the City Champions program has inadvertently given *Pulse Topology* a bonus layer of meaning — one that Lozano-Hemmer did not orchestrate, but which he welcomes.



Pulse Topology is installed inside a storage chamber that is typically closed to the public. (Jonathan Gazze)

There's something powerful about choosing healthcare workers to activate the installation, he says — and indeed, in past *Pulse* projects, he's invited specific folks to share their heartbeats before anyone else, people whose life stories carry some kind of symbolic value. "The people on the frontlines, I think, are unsung heroes," he says. "There are stories that can be told. There are stories of solidarity, there are stories of perseverance, stories of stamina and the wonder of scientists who have managed in record time to generate a vaccine. I mean, I think that those stories need to be told, and this is one way that we can do that, perhaps."

For Steel, the story she pulled from *Pulse Topology* was personal. "Being nominated was so healing because it let me know that even my contribution — it was like that one little light," she says.

"Even when we feel insignificant, we are making a difference. ... This pandemic has been so challenging and it just feels overwhelming at times. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help. But for me, going through that experience was like, 'Just

keep going.' You shine your light, others will shine their lights. We will get through this."

As intimate as the experience sounds, it's not a solitary one. For Karleigh Darnay, a community health and education coordinator at CAMH and another early visitor to the installation, the opportunity to simply gather in public was meaningful. "We were able to connect with other people through this piece," says Darnay. "People are there watching you as you're interacting with it."

“Going through [Pulse Topology] was like, 'Just keep going.' You shine your light, others will shine their lights. We will get through this.”

- Lee Steel, *Heart of the City Champion*

"It was one of the first events that I've actually had a chance to go to since COVID," says Darnay. Just to be there — "to appreciate art, be around other people" — was exciting, she says.

Lozano-Hemmer observed something similar as he took his first walkthrough at The Bentway. "You know, the bulbs are impressive as a suspended cloud of these glimmering lights, but equally impressive to me is just how people negotiate walking around each other, perhaps smiling at some point, perhaps finding connection." Right now, he says, the most "radical" thing you can do in public is hanging out. And, he says, "I think that's what we are all hoping to do."



Tickets to see Pulse Topology can be reserved at www.thebentway.com/pulsetickets. (Jonathan Gazze)

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Pulse Topology. To Oct. 31 at The Bentway, Toronto. Pre-registration is required. www.thebentway.ca



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