

SIGHTS



Museums
Galleries
Events
Kids
Eating out

Walking with my shadows

Imagine standing in a brightly lit street and someone else's body appearing in your shadow. **Mark Irving** explains all

If you were in charge of "the world's largest interactive video project", where would you put it? An airy gallery space? A museum foyer? How about a regional British city centre?

Over the coming weeks, *Under Scan*, masterminded by the 38-year-old Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, will take up more than 1,500sq metres of pedestrianised areas in Leicester, Northampton, Derby and Nottingham. Starting at dusk, the world's most powerful projector (110,000 lumens of intensity) will flood a vast area with bright light, casting strong shadows off the people walking through it.

Now for the science bit. A sophisticated camera and sensor system will track these passers-by, and a video portrait of a stranger will appear in their shadows. Using the latest technology, about a thousand video portraits of local people — filmed by a regional team of videographers — will be projected and activated. The por-

But instead of creating a project where the camera takes images, I want to see what would happen if we turned this around and they gave us images instead."

As you walk through this lit-up area, then, you'll experience a number of very different encounters as your shadow passes over certain surfaces: people smiling at you, beckoning to you, shouting, screaming, looking sad, swearing — the great range of human emotion on display. I feel twinges of Hogarth, the great 18th-century artist who held a vivid mirror up to English society.

But what about the problems? Wasn't Lozano-Hemmer worried about the Friday-night syndrome, with pub-crawlers delivering their stomach contents to camera?

"I'm obviously aware of the potential for moronic behaviour but I wanted to demonstrate something else, how people go about their own business. It's a way of taking over public space. I want to remind people of

get me wrong, I love the notion of public performance that Lozano-Hemmer's getting at, but it's just that we're going to need a crash course in the art of public courtesy to make the best of it.

The project marks a "massive programme of cultural activity" that "will support the creation of vibrant cultural quarters and will encourage innovative approaches to public space by linking the region's scientific and technological achievements to the flourishing arts scene", or so states the East Midlands Development Agency which, with Arts Council England, commissioned the project.

But aside from the debate about whether art can actually regenerate inner cities, what is interesting about Lozano-Hemmer's project, with its interaction between live and "fictive" people, is how it manages to reflect an interest in the magic realist encounters found in so much Latin-American literature.

Lozano-Hemmer says: "You can't grow up in Latin America without knowing about the magic realism of García Márquez and Borges." He also cites the playwright Bertolt Brecht as an inspiration: "He wanted to show his audience where the deceit of the performance actually stops. He wanted people to understand that reality is separate from the work. That's why I wanted people walking through these spaces to be able to see also one large screen where the mechanics of the tracking process that makes these portraits appear will be visible."

Magic or no magic, the citizens of Leicester, Northampton, Derby and Nottingham will find themselves part of something bigger than their shopping list. ■

Under Scan is showing at Humberstone Gate, Leicester, until Jan 22; Market Square, Northampton, Feb 3-12; Market Place, Derby, Feb 24-Mar 5; and Canal Side at Castle Wharf, Nottingham, Mar 17-26 (www.threecitiescreate.org.uk/_EMDA_Cultural_Quarters/)

"As you walk across the area, you'll experience people smiling at you, beckoning, shouting"

traits are shown in these areas of shadow without distortion and in scale through the use of a robotic device in the projector that tilts the image according to computer guidance. This means that your progress across the city centre is watched in detail and your encounters with your fellow citizens, albeit represented in images, are made as dynamic as possible.

If this makes you think of what CCTV hell might be like, then you are probably thinking along the same lines as Lozano-Hemmer. "I'm very concerned with surveillance as an issue, in what you might call the technologies of suspicion. Today it has become so ominous, with cameras being used to make judgments about ethnic traits and human behaviour.

Under Scan projects human images on to people's shadows. Photographs by Richard Cannon

their sense of promenading, that there's a public notion of performance that we're all involved in, that being out in public isn't just about shopping."

This is where I fear the cultural difference between the artist, a cultivated Latin, and most people in England might be rather telling. Lozano-Hemmer, 38, comes from a society, one nurtured under the softening southern sun, where people go out to enjoy themselves by showing how smart and prosperous they are. In his society, polite behaviour — indeed, over-polite, one might say — is the filter through which all sorts of messages are conveyed.

This is not, sadly, the English way, even if the expanse of flesh on display on an average midwinter's night in our city centres might seem more suitable to balmy evenings in Seville, Mexico City or Buenos Aires. Don't

