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Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time

By Micheál O'Connell

Surveillance equipment comprises the main component of almost all of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's art work. The oldest piece on display at Mexico's debut show at the Venice Biennale is *Surface Tension* which was developed for an event in Madrid in 1992. A big eye on a screen follows the spectator (if 'spectator' is suitable in this case) around a room. Yes it's unnerving even though we know there is no magic involved and the method has been made apparent. Invigilators are happy to explain how the more complicated of Lozano-Hemmer's systems operate: clearly he wants this. The most technologically elaborate installation is called *Wavefunction* and was developed for and premiered at the Biennale. Like another work *Under scan* (2006) a degree of suspense has been contrived in. First participants are given the major experience then in a second room its workings are revealed. The overwhelming compulsion is to return to the original space but better educated for another order of engagement with the same work.

There are six pieces in total on display and what's impressive firstly is that everything works. How often have you visited technology-oriented exhibitions in which equipment has crashed or worse still has not been started up at all or has not been able to cope with the usually mild, and completely predictable, inclination of members of the public to test and subvert interactive art? In fact at Arsenale in Venice a potentially exciting piece which used the online world Second Life remained shut down for days on end. Lozano-Hemmer's attention to detail, to the right kind of perfectionism (which is radically different from pedantry) combined with algorithms and feedback loops which handle every situation helps to ensure a more substantial experience.

Less of the showing off at the expense of outcome which is typical with technology-artists is evident here too. To some extent this must have been a factor for the Renaissance painters who occupied the same city a few hundred years before with oil paint, canvas, techniques for perspective, sfumato and exotic pigments having just been discovered or newly invented. It is not always a problem but just because an artist can do something doesn't mean they have to.

The phrase Relational Aesthetics gets a few mentions in documentation of the artist's public work but perhaps impact really comes from a different source: conceptual beauty and purity. This artist's work goes way beyond some heavy handed attempt at propaganda or political art (and there is a lot of that this year, both patronising and highly effective, around Venice in the other pavilions and exhibition venues) about surveillance too even though those considerations cannot be avoided. He is more playful. Public artists undoubtedly face an enormous problem in that they are compelled to be nice to the public or engage them in a positive or educational way. Sophie Calle (surely the giant at Biennale number 52) gives herself freedom to employ surveillance in a less user-friendly manner though with Lozano-Hemmer's *Under scan* in particular, passers-through are challenged to deal with a darker metaphor.