
How Do You Enjoy A Downpour Without Getting Wet? Welcome To The Rain Room

After the wettest summer in living memory, the Rain Room, a new art installation at London arts center [The Barbican](#), promises what must be every Briton's dream: a chance to control a torrential downpour of rain. The installation, created by arts collective [rAndom International](#), lets visitors walk through rain without getting wet—which perhaps explains why in just five days since opening it's proven so popular people are queuing for two hours to get in.

Visitors to Rain Room, developed for The Barbican's The Curve exhibition space, approach through a darkened corridor that echoes with the sound of pouring rain. The first thing they see is the shadows of people ahead already standing by and in the rain. But take a few paces more and they will see a 100-meter-square space filled with geometrically perfect rainfall—2,500 liters of water falling from the ceiling at 1,000 liters per minute, to be precise.

«We came up with the idea three years ago when brainstorming for another project which involved printing with water drops released onto water-reactive surfaces,» explains rAndom international co-founder and director Hannes Koch. «We realized if you can print by dropping water droplets onto a surface, we could also make it rain. We thought how cool would it be to make it rain inside, and to be able to stand inside that rain without getting wet.»

The idea was simple. Implementation, however, was anything but. It took the south London-based art collective two years to develop the technical system that would allow them to make it rain indoors. Two years were also spent honing the idea into an installation appropriate for The Curve's particular dimensions and space.

«An important first step was researching how and why it rains, what rain drops look like and how they behave, and how to create a single rain drop,» adds Koch, part of the lead team on the project which also included co-directors Stuart Wood and Florian Ortkrass—the three founded rAndom in 2005 after meeting at the Royal College of Art—and lead engineer Peter Dalton, who joined rAndom as Designer in 2009.

One major challenge was to re-create rainfall—which requires a typical fall of 12 meters to generate its average speed—in a room with only a four-meter roof drop. Another was the health and safety issues raised by the presence of standing water in a public space and the bacteria that can accumulate within it. Such issues were resolved, however, with extensive prototyping and financial backing from The Franco Foundation.

Rain Room's biggest surprise, of course, is the chance to walk through rain without getting wet. This is achieved with the use of eight industrial-grade, 3-D depth cameras positioned along each side of the ceiling. When someone walks beneath, the sensors track the movement and the valves through which the rain comes are turned on and off accordingly. The net effect for the visitor is the sensation that their body is repelling the rain itself.

Aside from the spectacle of rain indoors light, sound, and smell are also key, Koch adds: «Once we had the prototype we knew would work, the theatrical experience emerged only once we began setting it up in the Curve space. We played around a lot with the lighting over the month before launch, which is when we settled on a single light source at the back to visually carve out every drop of rain.»

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The end result is as much a social experiment as a work of art, rAndom claims: an exploration of people expectations of and reactions to the environment.

«What we hope people will take away from this is personal and different for each of us, but for me it's about empowerment and control over the environment and our relationship with that,» Koch continues. «There have been many human attempts to control the environment—the Chinese even tried exploding rain out of the skies for the Beijing Olympics. But my interest is how people respond to this and to explore this artistically.»

It's not exactly scientific, he admits. But then that's not really surprising as rAndom's specialty is installation art.

Earlier this year the collective ran Future Self, sponsored by Absolut Vodka, at Berlin's MADE space. This interactive work studied human movement through the interaction of two dancers with each other and a sculptural monolith measuring 1200 x 1500 x 3450 mm composed of aluminum, custom electronics, 3-D cameras, LEDs, and brass rods. The performance was choreographed by Wayne McGregor and accompanied by a score written by Max Richter inspired by the structure of light.

«We're artists rather than designers—our focus is on what interests us, rather than satisfying the particular interests of any commercial backer. That said, we have in the past created installations supported by commercial funding—but only where it is clear from the outset this is an art project where we, as artists, have complete creative control,» Koch adds. «It's the only way if we are to avoid the potential for unavoidable clashes of interest.»

Rain Room runs at The Barbican Centre in London from October 4, 2012 until March 3, 2013.