

RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer was born in Mexico City in 1967. In 1989 he received a B.Sc. in Physical Chemistry from Concordia University in Montréal, Canada.

He was the first artist to represent Mexico at the Venice Biennale with an exhibition at Palazzo Van Axel in 2007. His public art has been commissioned for the Millennium Celebrations in Mexico City (1999), the Expansion of the European Union in Dublin (2004), the Student Massacre Memorial in Tlatelolco (2008), the Vancouver Olympics (2010), the pre-opening exhibition of the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi (2015), and the activation of the Raurica Roman Theatre in Basel (2018).

“Border Tuner” is a large-scale, participatory art installation designed to interconnect the cities of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Powerful searchlights make “bridges of light” that open live sound channels for communication across the U.S./Mexico border. The piece creates a fluid canopy of light that can be modified by visitors to six interactive stations, three placed in El Paso and three in Juárez.

Each of the interactive “Border Tuner” stations features a microphone, a speaker and a large wheel or dial. As a participant turns the dial, three nearby searchlights create an “arm” of light that follows the movement of the dial, automatically scanning the horizon. When two such “arms of light” meet in the sky and intersect, automatically a bi-directional channel of sound is opened between the people at the two remote stations. As they speak and hear each other, the brightness of the “light bridge” modulates in sync, — a glimmer similar to a Morse code scintillation. Every interactive station can tune any other, so for example a participant in Mexico can connect to the three U.S.-based stations or to the other two in Mexico, as they wish.

“Border Tuner” is not only designed to create new connections between the communities on both sides of the border, but to make visible the relationships that are already in place: magnifying existing relationships, conversations and culture. The piece is intended as a visible “switchboard” of communication where people can self-represent. The project seeks to provide a platform for a wide-range of local voices and an opportunity to draw international attention to the coexistence and interdependence between the sister cities that create the largest binational metropolitan area in the western hemisphere.



RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER, *Border Tuner/Sintonizador Fronterizo*, Relational Architecture 23, 2019

RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER, *Border Tuner/Sintonizador Fronterizo*, Bowie High-School/Parque Chamizal, El Paso/Ciudad Juárez, Texas/Chihuahua, United States/México. Photo by MONICA LOZANO

ROBIN GREELEY

PARTICIPATORY AESTHETICS AT THE BORDER

The U.S.-Mexico border has long been a politically overdetermined space. Originating in the military conquest, formalized in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that forced Mexico to cede almost half its national territory to the U.S., the border resonates as an “open wound” for *mexicanos* living in the border region and beyond — what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “una herida abierta where the third world grates against the first and bleeds.”¹ In the U.S. imaginary, this liminal region has been constructed as a space of “lawlessness,” of “national security crisis” purportedly necessitating ever-increasing forms of racialized policing, surveillance, and “border control” in the service of capitalism.² In the U.S., notes border historian Ila Sheren, “[p]ublic perception spurs legislation, and a fear of a societal breakdown leads to a tightening of borders, or at least the appearance of stricter control.”³

In the face of this mythification of the U.S.-Mexico border as a space of chaos and violence, artists have countered by depicting the border as potent a site of energy and possibility. Against the U.S. doctrine of border militarization, ramped up from the 1980s onward, artists have enacted counter-occupations of the border space, reclaiming it as a transnational public space of collective access and citizen rights, not one of state, private, or corporate control. While performance artists have taken the border as a site for political critique since the mid-1980s, participatory art has specifically turned that performative critique toward collective, non-hierarchical (re)constructions of social connections and public space aimed at bridging the divides imposed under neoliberalism. This essay looks at one instance of this, *Border Tuner-Sintonizador Fronterizo*, which took place in 2019 in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and El Paso, Texas.



RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER, “Border Tuner / Sintonizador Fronterizo, Relational Architecture 23”, 2019. Photos by MONICA LOZANO.

In late November, 2019, a bi-national team of artists, curators, community leaders and activists worked with Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and his technical-media arts team to set into motion an enormous interactive sound-light installation that connected people across the U.S.-Mexico border. For ten nights, thousands of people in the border cities of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso engaged with *Sintonizador Fronterizo-Border Tuner* [hereafter *Border Tuner*], manipulating its powerful searchlights beaming up into the night sky to create enormous “bridges of light” controlled by the voices of the public on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.⁴ When two light beams crossed in the night sky, they would open sound channels such that people could speak with each other across the divide in unscripted, spontaneous conversations. The light beams would flicker in sync with the pace, timbre, and modulation of the voices, producing a thrilling visual light display visible for miles. Via the light-sound bridges, neighbors and family members delighted in reconnecting across the Río Grande; strangers struck up new bi-national friendships. A young boy in Ciudad Juárez played his trumpet for astonished listeners in El Paso. A woman flirted with a man in Ciudad Juárez; “¿eres guapo?” she queried. Poets in both cities instigated an impromptu bi-national Spanglish rapper contest. Activists formed political alliances, pledging to bring the power of their networks to work together on issues ranging from violence against women to transnational corporate extractivism to legal issue around migration and refugees. Everyone danced wildly to cumbia.

Prior to each night’s unscripted dialogues, thirty minutes of curated programming hosted a wide range of topic-specific conversations. The result of a year-long series of public meetings coordinated by community leaders on both sides of the border, these conversations included a diverse set of participants, from musicians, poets and beat boxers, to first nations representatives, braceros, historians, feminist- union- and anti-corporate activists, seniors, youth groups, art curators, and more. All interactions were broadcast live via the project’s web stream. *Border Tuner* was a “civic platform,” insisted Lozano-Hemmer, not a “corporate or governmental project,” underscoring its symbolic and ethical value as a community-generated event.⁵

PARTICIPATORY ART’S SOCIAL DIMENSION

Border Tuner exuberantly deployed what Claire Bishop calls the “social dimension” of participatory art.⁶ “One of the main impetuses behind participatory art,” argues Bishop, is “a restoration of [social bonds] through a collective elaboration of meaning.”⁷ By opening channels of transnational listening and speaking, participants actively constructed pluralistic, dialogic spaces that countered the hegemonic discourses surrounding the border that relentlessly determine who will – and will not — be heard. These transnational conversations repeatedly underscored the connections between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso — cities that form one of the largest bi-nationally intertwined economic regions in the world. As much as the two cities’ economic interactions are interconnected, so too are the cities connected by histories, cultures, natural and built environments, and by countless social and kinship connections across the border. Belying the English-language discourse of the border dominated by xenophobic and racist perceptions, *Border Tuner* participants elaborated a notion of “commons” – a set of shared resources, cultures, and identities.⁸

Central to *Border Tuner* was spectator involvement. Like many participatory art projects, it highlighted collaboration, such that the spectator was as responsible as the artist for the meaning and structure of the work. “Participatory art,” notes Bishop, “collapse[s] the distinction between performer and audience; between professional and non-professional; between production and reception.”⁹ Yet Lozano-Hemmer went even further in subordinating the role of the artist to the role of the public, deliberately leaving *Border Tuner* open to the exuberant connective serendipities injected by participants. These conversations generated innumerable new connections, whether between speakers who suddenly realized they had lived on the same street in Ciudad Juárez; between young migrant workers and a senior bracero speaking of his experiences; or between environmentalists coordinating cross-border anti-extractivist strategies. All these chance encounters became nodal points for sparking new social interconnections.

“The public brings the energy and the content,” notes Lozano-Hemmer, while “the artist just creates the conditions for an experiment to take place over time.”¹⁰ *Border Tuner*’s participatory spectator involvement challenged hierarchical models of control and authorship on multiple levels. The ‘value’ of the artwork was not a function the renown of its author. “I do not control *Border Tuner* and I am not the author,” insisted Lozano-Hemmer; “[in] the way that it moves totally out of my control, the artist is erased.”¹¹ The “artist” no longer acts as a determiner of meaning, the entity who generates the work and whose presence supplies a unifying principle that serves to limit and contain the work’s complexities, tensions and contradictions.¹²

PUBLIC SPACE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

To this discussion of the social dimension of *Border Tuner*’s participatory structure, we should add a focus on public space and its “role in producing [publics], counter-publics and the public sphere.”¹³ Public space has been trenchantly reregulated and curtailed since the 1980s “at the behest of state and corporate strategies” under neoliberalism, dramatically limiting citizen access and inclusionary constructions of the “public.”¹⁴ At the U.S.-Mexico border, the imbrication of this process with that of militarization in the name of “national security” accelerates the “process of social division” that characterizes borders generally.¹⁵ Yet it has also produced a range of “counter-publics” that have contested the exclusionary policies and norms institutionalized by the increasing regimentation and subjugation of the border to neoliberalism’s dictates.

Border Tuner is one of many interventions generated from the sphere of art that has privileged a multiplicity of voices. The aim is to underscore a democratic politics by recasting the border as a space for true debate. As such, interventions such as *Border Tuner* raise interesting questions about the nature of public space. For example, how does participatory art help us understand the interaction between collective claims to public space and the *materiality* of that space, in the service of building an inclusive participatory politics? That is, how do these physical spaces – or dematerialized spaces in the case of digital and electronic media — shape our concepts of democratic political engagement? And, alternatively, how are those spaces reconfigured by these collective claims?

Clearly, *Border Tuner's* effort to reshape the border as a shared, collective space rests on a utopian aesthetics of public collectivity with a long history stemming back to avant-garde experimentations such as Arseny Avraamov's *Symphony of Factory Sirens* (U.S.S.R., 1922) or Mexican Muralism's reformulation of elite institutional spaces into arenas of popular expression during the 1920s and 30s. Such projects were understood as laboratories of experimentation, as utopian spaces in which to visualize new models of social and economic collectivity, public space, and the public sphere.

The conundrum, however, is how to put these aesthetic projects into action. That is, how aesthetic models of collectivity in public space may – or may not – be translatable into actual political practices of democracy.¹⁶ The dangers lurking in this problem surfaced to full effect in the 1930s in Nazi cooptation of public space for mass spectacles. Thus, in part, the question becomes: how and to what extent can *Border Tuner's* approaches to public space be translated into a progressive politics of democratic collectivity, without falling either into alienating spectacle, or into simplistic feel-good communities of consensus that merely paper over social tensions and differences?

CONSTRUCTED SITUATIONS

Border Tuner was a work fully immersed in an assessment of the explosion of digital communication technologies that have dramatically

reconfigured previous notions of citizenship, political engagement, economic survival, public space and the public sphere. In the age of right-wing extremist Internet sites such as 8chan which, although ostensibly 'democratic' spaces of free speech, seem the polar opposite of the enlightened public sphere, earlier utopian and social critical approaches to public participation seem insufficient, even naïve, outpaced by the exponential growth of social media and digital technologies of communication.

In these contexts, it seems pertinent to reassess the social aims of participatory art, in particular the aim of restoring the social bond through a collective elaboration of meaning. It is here that we might turn, as does Claire Bishop, to Guy Debord, the Situationist International (SI), and their critique of capitalist spectacle. In the face of the relentless logic of consumer capitalism, in which human relations are replaced by commodity relations to mind-numbing effect, new "constructed situations" must be mobilized to "produce new social relationships and thus new social realities."¹⁷ "The constructed situation," according to the SI, "is necessarily collective"; a "transitory" yet cathartic "moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed" collectively, "on the ruins of the modern spectacle."¹⁸ Constructing situations therefore implies bringing collective action to bear on our social surroundings in order to transform them, and in the process also to transform ourselves.¹⁹



RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER, "*Border Tuner / Sintonizador Fronterizo, Relational Architecture 23*", 2019. Photos by MONICA LOZANO.

Using the SI “constructed situation” as a referent, *Border Tuner* sought to reappropriate the U.S.-Mexico Border, turning it from a site whose history had been relentlessly mediatized as a violent space of national security threat, into a public space whose history is the result of a multitude of citizen voices. It posited an egalitarian model of civic association structured through unscripted collective engagement in public space. Furthermore, in “mak[ing] conversations visible and tangible by means of light,” *Border Tuner* articulated the conditions of that civic engagement without monumentalizing them.²⁰ Light and sound formed a principle measure and structure of that engagement, becoming the means through which citizens activated their participation in social space. Luminosity, translated from sound and beamed across the sky, turned spectacle into deliberately ephemeral yet powerful critique.

In this way, *Border Tuner* contrasted sharply with the coercive public spectacles of authoritarian regimes, from the Nazis to the present, even as it used similar technologies such as powerful anti-aircraft searchlights, digital sound channels, and the Internet. Like many of Loza-

no-Hemmer’s interventions, in *Border Tuner* “personal interactivity [transformed] intimidation into ‘intimacy’: the possibility for people to constitute new relationships with the urban landscape and therefore to reestablish a context for [...] social performance.”²¹ That is to say, *Border Tuner* functioned as a “constructed situation” in the Situationist International sense. It organized a “transitory” yet cathartic “moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed” collectively, “on the ruins of the modern spectacle.”²² *Border Tuner* tapped into popular energies, providing those energies with a conduit to a generative presence in public space.

And finally, *Border Tuner* powerfully explored how public space — whether physical spaces such as public plazas or national borders, or dematerialized spaces such as social media — shape our concepts of democratic political engagement. And, equally importantly, how those spaces can be productively, indeed exuberantly reconfigured by these collective, participatory claims.

ROBIN GREELEY, University of Connecticut, 2020



RAFAEL LOZANO-HEMMER, “*Border Tuner / Sintonizador Fronterizo, Relational Architecture 23*”, 2019. Photos by **MONICA LOZANO**.

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