


A Canadian artist's light installation lets people talk across the Mexico-U.S. border

Connecting searchlight beams in the sky open a 2-way audio connection between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez

Nov 22, 2019



A family watches massive beams of light intersect across the U.S.-Mexico border as part of electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's new installation called Border Tuner. (Monica Lozano/BorderTuner.net)

 [Listen](#) 6:37

[Read Story Transcript](#)

A lot of things separate the neighbouring towns of El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico — a river, a reinforced border fence and, most of all, a U.S. administration bent on keeping migrants out.

But in many other ways, the communities are inextricably linked by work, trade, history and family. It's that connection that inspired Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's new art installation *Border Tuner*.

The massive, bi-national display allows total strangers or old friends to connect across the border using intersecting beams of light.

"I'm not creating bridges of communication. Those bridges are already existing," Lozano-Hemmer told *As It Happens* host Carol Off. "I'm just highlighting that they exist."

How does it work?

On either side of the border, there are three stations, each with a microphone, speaker and tuning wheels that control a searchlight, that can be seen from a 50-kilometre radius.

When your light beam intersects with someone else's in the sky, a two-way audio connection opens up and you can talk to the other person through the microphone.

"As you speak, the brightness of the bridge of light that you've created with this person actually glimmers to your voice," Lozano-Hemmer said.

"The computer modulates the bridge so that you can see that there is this kind of tangible aspect to our conversation that is very visible."

People use Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's interactive art installation *Border Tuner* to communicate across the U.S.-Mexico border. (Miguel Legault/Antimodula) 2:20

Some of the people connecting through the installation are complete strangers reaching out across the void, he said.

"But also we're seeing a lot of people making appointments to meet each other at a particular station and coming to speak," Lozano-Hemmer said. "This is a region that has a lot of families,

for example, that have been separated."

Music, flirtation and 'stories of loss'

Watching how people interact with the installation has been fascinating, he said.

"There's a lot of flirting, which is actually really not something I had anticipated. I thought it was going to be a little bit more sombre," he said. "We had two mariachi bands playing for each other, serenading across the border. It was beautiful."



People connect via microphone across the Mexico border as part of electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's new installation Border Tuner. (Monica Lozano/BorderTuner.net)

But it's not all artistic collaborations and amorous banter.

"Sometimes it's quite grueling and sad, and stories of loss and stories of violence and stories of migration," he said.

"It's a project that is completely out of my control, and that's something that's very important. It's not about what I think or what I say. It's about what the communities are expressing through these interfaces."

- [AS IT HAPPENS Texas man creates video game about the perils of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border](#)
- [This Canadian-born artist is building a wall of cheese along the U.S.-Mexico border](#)

But in some ways, it's also a deeply personal project.

Lozano-Hemmer is himself an immigrant from Mexico, though his story is much different from those who make the dangerous trek across the border seeking refuge. He first came to Canada to study. He graduated from Concordia University in Montreal, where he still resides.

"Though my circumstances of migration ... are very different from the stories that you hear here in the field, I can't help but be, you know, influenced or touched or moved or motivated by some of the rhetoric that has come out about migration and about the kind of adversarial narratives that come out of [the Trump] administration," he said.

"So for me, as a Mexican migrant, even though I would recognize my privilege, it's an honour actually to be able to complicate things for that clear narrative of rivalry."



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is a Mexican-Canadian artist known for his massive interactive sound and light installations (Monica Lozano/BorderTuner.net)

The installation runs until Nov. 24, and those who can't make it to the border in person are invited to [submit an audio recording online](#) to be broadcast through the stations when nobody is using them.

People are also invited to [tune into to the nightly livestreams](#) to see a half-hour of performances by local artists, activists, and historians.

The project was carried out in collaboration Rubin Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso and the El Paso Community Foundation, with permission from authorities on both sides of the border, including the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Written by Sheena Goodyear. Interview produced by Katie Geleff.