

An Installation Traverses Texas and Mexico to Promote Cross-Border Communication

With “Border Tuner,” artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer said he’s not in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez to make bridges, but to highlight the bridges that already exist.

Sarah M. Vasquez November 22, 2019



Beams of light connect across the US-Mexico border between El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (photo by Sarah M. Vasquez)

EL PASO, Texas — Driving towards the US-Mexico border at night, it’s hard to miss the beams of lights intersecting across the Rio Grande. These beacons are part of Border Tuner, a large-scale participatory art installation created by artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and along the border that divides El Paso, Texas and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. There are six stations — three in each country — with a microphone, a speaker, and a dial that

controls the light that shines out from each station. People use the dial to move the light beam through the sky, and if two beams of lights meet, whether their origins are in the same or different countries, a computer opens a line of communication between the two operators. This allows people at the stations to talk to each other, with the volume and animation of each voice controlling the intensity of the light beam.

The website offers a glimpse into the installation for those who can’t make the trek to the area. People can leave their own message that will be played at the border or they can watch the livestream that shows who is speaking at the stations or what’s going on during the events each night.

Another part of the installation, called Remote Pulse, is an additional artwork that

invites people to place their hands on two steel plates that measure their heartbeat and send it to whoever is standing at the station in the other country.

“When you put your hands, you feel the heartbeat of the other,” Lozano-Hemmer told *Hyperallergic*. “People get surprised by the intimacy that it affords. It’s quite robust. It’s literally like putting your hands on someone’s chest.”



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, the artist behind *Border Tuner* (photo by Sarah M. Vasquez)

The timing of the project seems particularly appropriate, given El Paso was the site of a racially-driven mass shooting this summer, but *Border Tuner* has been two years in the making. As a Mexican migrant living in Canada, Lozano-Hemmer wanted to do a project at the El Paso–Juarez border during what he sees as a time of division and adversarial rhetoric. He had some ideas for the project, but he was asked by local artists and historians to avoid a project about the border wall and was instead asked to focus on the interconnection between the sister cities.

“I realized after a while that you should not come here to say anything,” said Lozano-Hemmer. “You should come here to listen.”

Listening is the heart of *Border Tuner*. Lozano-Hemmer uses the sky and atmosphere to explore how people listen to each other and can share space despite a physical wall that keeps people separated. He said that he’s not in El Paso and Juarez to make bridges, but to highlight the bridges that already exist.

The installation launched on November 13 and runs through Sunday the 24. Each night is host to a different theme, featuring guest speakers, panels, and events. It was chilly on the night of Thursday, November 21, but a small crowd braved the weather to listen to a conversation with Mexican luchador Cassandro El Exótico. Cassandro spoke about gender and *lucha libre* for the night dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community.

Cassandro, who’s real name is Saúl Armendáriz, has been wrestling for almost 30



Cassandro El Exótico speaks during a public event for Border Tuner (photo by Sarah M. Vasquez)

years, pushing against machismo stereotypes in Mexican culture as a confident gay and cross-dressing wrestler. He has spent the last year traveling around the globe to promote a documentary about his career, using his voice and experiences to empower himself and others.

“I had to work twice and three times worse than anybody because of my sexual identity, so I don’t want people to go through it,” Cassandro said in an interview with

Hyperallergic.

Cassandro highlighted the importance of the installation during this time. He sees the border wall as a separation of the cultures that, though different, are also deeply intertwined. He said it’s a beautiful installation to take place during the healing process after the shooting at a Walmart on August 3 that claimed the lives of 22 people.

“When we’re here at an event like this, you feel the love, the community,” said Cassandro. “We come together as human beings regardless of who you like, what you like, whatever color, religion. Just being ourselves and what we can we bring.”

The El Paso side of Border Tuner takes place at Bowie High School, across the street from the Chamizal Park in Ciudad Juárez, near the campground for migrants waiting to get into the US. Lozano-Hemmer was happy to report that some of them are using the microphones and the artwork to make their voice heard.



People can speak to others across the border at each station during the Border Tuner art installation (photo by Sarah M. Vasquez)

“Something so simple as projections, cameras, and an internet connection bringing people together has meant a lot,” said Lozano-Hemmer.

Border Tuner is open to the public every night from 6:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. The installation runs through Sunday, November 24.