

Censoring the Voice Tunnel: 5 Questions with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

by CLARA OLSHANSKY on JULY 31, 2013 · 0 COMMENTS



Images courtesy of the artist

In a remarkable case of irony, the NYPD has attempted to censor an art installation about free speech. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's upcoming Park Avenue tunnel installation, [Voice Tunnel](#) is an open platform, allowing anyone to say whatever they want through an intercom that will translate the noise into waves of light and sound. The NYPD, however, wanted to include a [6-second delay](#), in case they needed to censor anything dangerous. They compromised: [a monitor will stand by](#) as people speak, and, in case of anything really incendiary, there is a button to delete the recording.

This is a uniquely appropriate issue for Lozano-Hemmer, whose work often concerns [free speech](#) and [monitoring the public](#).



The artist talks with us about how he feels about the intervention, and what the censorship will look like.

1. Have you run into situations like this one, where your art is being censored, with local government before?

Pretty much every single government I have ever worked with initially wants to censor this kind of participatory piece, as they always assume the worst case scenario: namely, that someone will monopolize the artwork to transmit insults, slander, or incendiary comments such as racist, sexist, homophobic, or any other intolerant expression. I have always prevailed in this discussion against censorship with the following arguments:

1. In my 20 year career, having done about 30 of these kinds of shows, we have found that 99 per cent of the content is always interesting, surprising, touching, poetic, funny, absurd and diverse. Sure, you get some insults and other idiotic material, but then again, you can hear that just by sitting on a park bench or turning on the TV.
2. If you censor the work, the only message you are sending is that of censorship. People that have a lot of time on their hands will naturally feel inclined to explore how to beat it. It's better to let them say whatever they want and then move on to the next participant.
3. In these artworks, like in public space, people tend to self-control. It is not anonymous nor private participation. For example, while you are speaking into the intercom it is unlikely you will insult a racial group as chances are you will be in the immediate vicinity of people from that group.
4. In tense political situations you specifically benefit from this kind of open artwork as an outlet for people to self-represent.
5. It is time to stop having a condescending and paternalistic attitude toward the general public. It is that attitude which has led to widespread disengagement, apathy and mistrust.

2. What do you think the NYPD was trying to prevent from being said?

Originally they asked about whether we would have a 6 second delay so we could censor the voices. I flipped out because I am so against Prism, Echelon, Drones and other government and corporate over-reach. I gave them the arguments above. Then I found out that their main concern was the possibility of some idiot shouting "bomb!" or "fire!" inside the tunnel and creating chaos. That's a pretty reasonable concern, obviously, as you stand in a relatively narrow tunnel surrounded by thousands of people.

3. Do you usually have to clear such large-scale artworks with the police, or did they just take notice with this particular project?

We don't usually have to clear the projects with the police. For Park Avenue Tunnel it is normal for the police to be involved as the tunnel has never been opened to pedestrians and people are understandably concerned after the Boston Marathon bombing for example. I am thankful that the NYPD will search each and every knapsack that goes into the tunnel.

[RLH]



4. Will the person monitoring what's said be someone from the NYPD?

No, it will be a docent with an interest in art and freedom of speech.

5. *What did you mean when you said there would be a “delete button”?*

The docent will press a delete button if he or she sees a guy (let’s face it, it would be a guy, statistically) yelling FIRE! or something like that. This will delete that recording. Since I did not want silence I decided that the deleted recording would be automatically replaced with a quote from García Lorca, Laurie Anderson, Kathy Acker, Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes and other interesting NYC-related poets or authors.

