

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

AF artforum.com/features/best-show-2025-rafael-lozano-hemmer-julie-walsh-1234738094

Julie Walsh

December 1, 2025



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Dark Ride*, 2024. Performance view, en route from Miami to Naples, FL, December 6, 2024. Photo: Antimodular Studio.

MOST BUS RIDERS are isolated by their headphones, enveloped in their own private audio-generated worlds. But on *Dark Ride*—a unique three-hour sonic journey aboard a chartered bus during last year’s [Miami](#) Art Week—a twelve-speaker sound system created a shared soundtrack that forged a temporary community. The Friday-evening excursion was organized by the Montreal-based artist [Rafael Lozano-Hemmer](#) as a combined rolling seminar on experimental sound and temporary performance art venue, incongruously set inside a party bus with dark tinted windows and a stripper pole. The bus also was our ride to the opening of Lozano-Hemmer’s sound art survey, “Obra Sonora” (Sound Work), at the Baker Museum in Naples that evening.

As the twenty-eight passengers—all invited by the artist and similarly clothed in black, per his request—settled into the black leather seats, *Dark Ride* spirited its passengers away from the commercial excesses of the Magic City and toward the sunset over what was then still known as the Gulf of Mexico. While passing through the Miami neighborhoods of Little Haiti and Opa-locka—the first city in northern Dade County to integrate—we listened to defiantly creative, category-defining compositions like “Study for Human-Made Bird Calls and Microphone out a Moving Car Window,” 2020, by the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and artist Raven Chacon. This eight-

minute piece begins with pleasantly chirping birds, but builds into a cacophony of tweets as a gentle breeze becomes a powerful wind. When the storm finally arrives, birds and winds duel for dominance, each at times succeeding in silencing the other in the ensuing din—though ultimately, the wind is victorious. In fact, the composer made this track by holding a microphone out of a car window; listening to it on the bus while watching the scenery (including birds perched on trees and power lines) roll by, we found ourselves immersed in an audiovisual meta-moment.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Voz Alta (Loud Voice)*, 2008. Performance view, Mexico City, 2008. Photo: Antimodular Research.

Lozano-Hemmer is one of the foremost contemporary producers of sound, music, installation, and interactive art. Perhaps his unique approach—which is defined by the sophisticated use of technology in works that imbue the spectacular with a dose of criticality—has something to do with growing up as the son of Mexico City nightclub owners, and later, his contrasting experience as a research chemist. He designs works that give physical shape to sound while encouraging and enabling people to self-represent in ways that are meaningful to them, often encouraging them to find their own “voice” in public spaces and discourses. For example, in *Voz Alta (Loud Voice)*, 2008—a public artwork and documentary video commissioned by Mexico City’s Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) to mark the fortieth anniversary of the Tlatelolco student massacre on October 2, 1968—participants spoke into a megaphone at the site of the tragedy. The artist’s electronics transformed the megaphone’s signal into powerful flashes from four

searchlights projecting onto government and cultural spaces across the city, and the event was live-cast by Radio UNAM, allowing listeners to hear the voices in real time. Thousands participated without censorship or intervention; when the megaphone went silent, archival recordings of activists and poets recalling the massacre filled the space.

While he is known for such large-scale, technically complex pieces, Lozano-Hemmer's focus is arguably less on the technology than on gathering people in singular spatiotemporal zones, often with a political undertone. *Dark Ride* derives from Lozano-Hemmer's 2016 proposal for a social sculpture that would address the lack of public transit in Saint Louis by offering free rides ferrying passengers from segregated and disadvantaged areas of the city to Laumeier Sculpture Park, which is located in a more affluent suburb. Inside a darkened bus, passengers were meant to listen to a changing soundtrack that responded to the bus's current geolocation. While that proposal was ultimately rejected, Lozano-Hemmer revived the idea for 2024, albeit with a very different audience and aim. The people invited on the December excursion had all made such significant contributions to the field of media art that Lozano-Hemmer was prompted to joke as the journey began, "If this bus had an accident, we would erase a lot of the history of media art in North America." The riders included three of the most senior and influential curators in the field—Barbara London, formerly of the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art's Christiane Paul; and SFMoMA's Rudolf Freiling—as well as younger curators from institutions across the country, including UCSD's Stuart Collection and the Pérez Art Museum Miami. The rest of the contingent included artists, academics, critics, poets, and other cultural workers who could claim some kind of connection to sound art; these included New School executive dean Christoph Cox (author of *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*, 2018); Yale performance studies scholar Alexandra T. Vazquez (author of *The Florida Room*, 2022); and Xenia Benivolski, a Canadian curator of sound art projects such as "You Can't Trust Music," all of whom participated, together with Freiling, in a public symposium at the Baker Museum the following day.



Bus for Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's 2024 *Dark Ride*, Miami, December 6, 2024. Photo: Antimodular Studio

At the outset, Lozano-Hemmer told us little about what to expect from the *Dark Ride*, other than that “we will all be going through something together,” referencing Ernest Hemingway: “An art ride is a moveable feast.” We soon realized that it was both a visual and an auditory feast, as warehouses, strip malls, palm trees, egrets, and South Florida’s Alligator Alley moved past the bus’s windows to the accompaniment of a curated selection of spoken-word performances and experimental music. As Lozano-Hemmer wrote to me afterward, “The juxtaposition of the tracks with the natural, cultural or political landscapes we traversed were not planned, but . . . they were nonetheless productive.” For example, the work by Chacon, a Navajo artist, happened to play as we were riding through Miccosukee land in the Everglades; in the conversation that immediately followed, Vazquez (a native Miamian) noted that the Miccosukee and Seminole of what is now Florida are known as “unconquered tribes,” having never been defeated nor ever signing a peace treaty with the US government.

The *Dark Ride* sound program began with three pieces that Lozano-Hemmer selected to provide historical context for what was to come. The first track, a 2007 recording of the 1911 composition “Sonata 3: II. *Allegro Agitato*” by Mexican pioneer Julián Carrillo, helped to introduce the overarching project of *Dark Ride*: to diversify the Western musical canon. In this new narrative, the history of atonal music’s liberation from the constraints of conventional Western music begins not in Europe but in Mexico. Carrillo’s “Sonido 13” (Thirteenth Sound) movement promoted compositions that elevate sound beyond the twelve whole and semitones used for millennia in the West, challenging the most fundamental practices of an entrenched artistic system. As the opening of the *Dark Ride* program, his “Sonata 3” represented not only a redefinition of

composition and a rejection of tonal structure, but a radical “departure” (pun intended) from an accepted canon that privileges the work of white male Europeans like Arnold Schoenberg. This spirit of disruption was continued by the second track, Austrian composer Ernst Toch’s “spoken chorus” of 1930 (“*Fuge aus der Geographie*”), which breaks the boundary between singing and speaking, anticipating several other pieces we heard that afternoon. Finally, Dick Higgins’s “Requiem for Wagner the Criminal Mayor, 2 Excerpts,” 1962, extended this history of sound art into the 1960s. Higgins was a member of the Fluxus movement and a friend of Lozano-Hemmer’s who developed the concept of Intermedia Art, which has shaped the latter’s career and establishes the art-historical pedigree of *Dark Ride* as an ephemeral media experience.



Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *Dark Ride*, 2024. Performance view, en route from Miami to Naples, FL, December 6, 2024. Photo: Antimodular Studio.

Lozano-Hemmer’s selections were followed by an aural program called Antimix that was curated specifically for the event by Christof Migone. Lozano-Hemmer has known Migone, a Toronto-based curator, producer, and practitioner of sound art, since their days producing programs for McGill University’s radio station in the ’80s. The Antimix lived up to its name, presenting relatively unfamiliar works chosen largely for their relationship to driving: the road trip, the vehicle, the mechanical sounds of passage. It contained, as Lozano-Hemmer wrote to me, “a dramaturgy of a journey.” After each track, riders had the opportunity to ask questions or engage in conversation about the piece (or partake of a shot of mezcal).

If media art installations sometimes invite criticism for being too “populist” or “spectacular,” *Dark Ride* provided a model for simultaneously celebrating and critically expanding the concept of the avant-garde, while highlighting the importance of community at its center.

The Antimix playlist began with a recording of Charles Amirkhanian's sound poetry work "Seatbelt, Seatbelt," 1973. The fifteen-minute piece starts with repetitions of the word "seatbelt" and then rapidly develops into a chorus of variations of the same word repeated simultaneously. It becomes harder to distinguish the word as the syllables deteriorate and then recombine into gibberish utterings and guttural sounds. After about five minutes, the piece shifts further into the land of the absurd as the symphony of "seatbelts" gives way to the phrase "cryptic quack chum bone"; many iterations of these words both repeated and intertwined as the bus passed north through Opa-locka. As the ride turned west, the mix shifted gears into "Car Alarm, Turn Signal," 2024, by Lia Kohl, a cellist, composer, and sound artist from Chicago. Kohl's piece combines long, soothing cello passages with musicalized car alarms and found recordings of turn signals, both treated as instruments in their own right. In the final minute, the turn signal becomes muffled and increasingly distant, as faint radio music gives way to static and wind sounds.



Maria Chavez performing with broken records, Baker Museum, Naples, FL, December 6, 2024. Photos: Antimodular Studio.

Migone's selections were punctuated by live, necessarily intimate performances by Kaie Kellough, a novelist, poet, and sound artist from Montreal, and Maria Chávez, a Peruvian turntablist based in New York. Kellough's wholly committed performance, "One Less Breath," used his mouth and body to explore new forms of elocution and diction, ranging from improvised, glitching, guttural words and sounds to an outpouring of scripted poetic text. Interweaving diverse practices ranging

from musique concrète to Afro-Caribbean traditions of breath and ritual, Kellough addressed varied themes including identity, race, the passage of time, and the artist's own aging. Throughout his performance, he used a custom microphone (designed by Stephan Schulz) outfitted with a filament bulb at its base that transduced his utterances into patterns that illuminated his face, recalling the audiovisual patterns in Lozano-Hemmer's *Voz Alta* and other works. One observant rider (my husband, Ralph, also a writer) noted in the post-performance discussion that in all the thousands of words spoken by Kellough, only one—"Ozempic"—would have allowed a listener to place the piece in the immediate present. In a way, this pinprick of a reference reflected the *Dark Ride* itself: a moment that could not have happened at any other time, and yet is part of a much larger and ongoing conversation.

After a break at a Miccosukee rest stop in the iconic "river of grass" of Big Cypress National Preserve, Chávez performed a work blending recordings from Mexico City's Fonoteca Nacional de México sound archive and the Clyfford Still archive in Denver. During a residency at the Fonoteca in 2024, Chávez had collected early recordings of a Mexican diplomat making a speech congratulating Thomas Edison on the invention of the phonograph. She intercut these with personal recordings of conversations with a dealer made by Still in his studio. As the piece played, Chávez accompanied it with live sounds generated by rubbing a microphone across her vintage Betsey Johnson dress, which was made from cassette tape ribbons. Later that night, at the Baker Museum opening, she performed a four-turntable, eight-channel DJ set in the museum's open-air courtyard, demonstrating her signature use of two-needle turntable heads and intentionally broken records.



Maria Chavez performing with broken records, Baker Museum, Naples, FL, December 6, 2024. Photos:
Antimodular Studio.

As the *Dark Ride* rolled into the mall-sprawl of Naples, the last work in Migone's Antimix cued up: Sarah Hennies's "Speech," 2012–14. It was a remarkably apt piece on which to end. The setting sun lent a golden hue to both the manicured palm fronds lining the streets and the Christmas trees strapped to the tops of cars, highlighting the surreal juxtaposition between natural beauty and suburban development. All around us, a steady flow of glowing cars streamed through intersection after intersection as we listened to the seven-minute piece, in which the word "car" becomes a phrase ("car, car, car, car"), followed by the sound of a breath before the sequence repeats. By the final minute, all traces of the "car" disappear: Only the spoken c remains, followed by a repeated metallic ping.

After it was over, we sat in convivial silence, collectively reflecting on the journey we had taken together. But the silence didn't last long: Lozano-Hemmer, who is known for ending his dinners and openings by spinning tracks under the stage name DJ Tacostán, put on some Colombian cumbia to play us off as we arrived at the Baker Museum. If media art installations sometimes invite criticism for being too "populist" or "spectacular," *Dark Ride* provided a model for simultaneously celebrating and critically expanding the concept of the avant-garde, while highlighting the importance of community at its center.

Julie Walsh is an independent curator of digital art based in Chicago.

Artforum is a part of Penske Media Corporation. © 2025 Artforum Media, LLC. All Rights Reserved.