

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

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## Giving a Voice to a Usually Off-Limits Tunnel

by [Allison Meier](#) on August 13, 2013



Park Avenue Voice Tunnel (all photographs by the author for Hyperallergic)

A whole seven blocks of subterranean Manhattan is being closed off for a pedestrian-only art installation that turns a tunnel into a pulsing light and sound experience.

Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's "[Voice Tunnel](#)" (2013) is activating the Park Avenue Tunnel between 33rd Street and 40th Street in Midtown in an installation in conjunction with the [DOT Summer Streets](#) that's happening just one more time this Saturday. Three-hundred speakers line the 1,400-foot-long tunnel with arches of light that flash in reaction to speakers that transmit the messages of visitors through the space.

I stopped by the installation this past Saturday, not just because I was curious about the light/sound installation, but because any chance to legally access a usually off-limits part of New York City infrastructure is incredibly appealing. This is the first time pedestrians have been able to walk in the Park Avenue Tunnel in its nearly 200 years of existence, and the worn stones of the tunnel, and even its corrugated metal roof, are the kind of city architecture that you can usually only glimpse from a speeding car window.



The installation itself is visually compelling and lured all visitors' cameras and phones out almost immediately at the first step inside. As you walk down the tunnel, you hear a cacophony of voices. When I was visiting, there was a lot of NYC-hype yells like "Brooklyn in the house!" and some of the revealingly personal yelps like "I love you Jessica, call me," and some people who just decided to scream. It was normally hard to make out many of the spoken words or phrases, and the sounds appeared to travel from the center of the tunnel, where the microphone was placed, outwards to the two tunnel openings where sounds were more distorted and muffled. But maybe the distortion is the point in reflecting the usual audible chaos in the city where you get the key notes from the loudest voices, and the rest becomes layered noise.

All the messages were recorded in the center of the tunnel in a spotlight. From there each voice progressed out from one speaker to the next, gradually indistinguishable after its center star turn. The constantly changing, crowd-sourced sound is one of the ephemeral touches to the installation. And it is just light and sound after all, and the moments when the tunnel plunged into still darkness with just the vented light angling down made the sudden roar of noise and light as they flew down the tunnel again more effective. Maybe in the end it verges more on a stunning light show than anything that will touch the consciousness deeply about communication and temporality, but as for the rare use of a subterranean space, Lozano-Hemmer has imagined a striking spectacle.

Here are some more photographs from "Voice Tunnel":



Inside the "Voice Tunnel"



Recording a message for the "Voice Tunnel"



Three of the 300 spotlights



Park Avenue Tunnel service box



Photographing the "Voice Tunnel"



The end of the "Voice Tunnel"



View down "Voice Tunnel"



Exiting the Park Avenue Tunnel



Exit of the Park Avenue Tunnel

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's [Voice Tunnel](#) continues in the Park Avenue Tunnel (33rd Street to 40th Street on Park Avenue, Manhattan) this Saturday, August 17, 7 am to 1 pm, as part of the DOT Summer Streets.