

Interactive Art Installation Lets Strangers Talk To Each Other Across The Border

November 22, 2019

MALLORY FALK



3-Minute Listen

+ PLAYLIST



These spotlights are part of a binational art installation that aims to connect people on both sides of the Rio Grande.

Carlos Morales / Marfa Public Radio

For several nights this month, searchlights have been illuminating the sky on the U.S.-Mexico border between El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. They don't have anything to do with stepped-up border enforcement. Instead, they're part of a binational art installation that aims to connect people on both sides of the Rio Grande.

The large-scale interactive installation is called Border Tuner. Here's how it works: You step up to a microphone and turn a small wheel that controls a set of searchlights. Someone at another station just across the border does the same. When your lights intersect in the sky, it opens a two-way channel of communication.

You can't see each other's faces, but you can hear each other's voices, booming from a loudspeaker. And you can start a conversation.

On a chilly night this week, Edna Leon leaned into a microphone at one of the stations outside Bowie High School, where there are three tuner stations. On the other side of the border in Juárez, Chamizal Park has three stations.

"Buenas noches," Leon said, tentatively, unsure who was on the other end. Three large searchlights flickered in time with her voice.

A response came back over the loudspeaker: "Buenas, buenas."

Leon introduced herself. She explained that she lives in El Paso but is originally from Meoqui, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

"I have roots there, but it's a struggle to be able to go" and visit, she said in Spanish. "So it makes me emotional to be able to communicate with my country without barriers, a passport, inspections."

"How beautiful," said her conversation partner.

Border Tuner, which ends on Sunday, was two years in the making. It's the brainchild of electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. He's originally from Mexico City and is now based in Montreal.

Lozano-Hemmer has created interactive sound and light installations all over the world, including in Abu Dhabi and Dublin. He had been drawn to the U.S.-Mexico border for years, but his desire to work here intensified after President Trump's election. He began meeting with artists in the region.

"I realized that everybody in the field is tired of a very specific border story coming out about divisiveness, about racism, about militarization," he said.



Surrounded by beams of lights, a man walks up to a microphone and tells the person across the border that he's new to El Paso. He moved here a few years ago from Ciudad Juárez, and says he misses it. The voice on the other side tells him to visit and they'll get tacos together.

Carlos Morales / Marfa Public Radio

"While all of this is true, there's so many other narratives that are being missed about interdependence and coexistence and about the fact that connections between, at least, El Paso and Ciudad Juárez go deep historically, fraternally, socially, environmentally, economically," he said.

Lozano-Hemmer designed a project to highlight those connections, in partnership with the Ruben Center for the Visual Arts at the University of Texas at El Paso and the El Paso Community Foundation.

Pulling off a large-scale art installation across international lines was no easy feat. Lozano-Hemmer had to coordinate with authorities on both sides of the border, including the Department of Homeland Security and the Federal Aviation Administration.

And when the U.S. government replaced a border fence between Bowie High School and Chamizal Park with new, stronger material, Lozano-Hemmer says he had to adapt

his technology. Now, the searchlights form a sort of bridge above the barrier.

"The idea that the artwork takes place above that wall to me is symbolically important because it's almost like you're trying to ignore it," Lozano-Hemmer said. "You're trying to say we still share the atmosphere."

Each night of the installation begins with a 30-minute curated performance by local artists, activists, and historians. There have been programs focused on indigenous voices, and on voices from the LGBTQ community. There was a cumbia night, and a night full of cover bands paying tribute to Juan Gabriel and Selena.

But the most intimate moments come when strangers connect. Two children discuss their favorite animals. An attorney who volunteers with asylum seekers and a middle school art teacher thank each other for their work. A woman in El Paso apologizes for President Trump; her conversation partner, in Juárez, tells her not to worry and that "he's only one person." Two women discover they love to sing, and perform a song together, their voices harmonizing through beams of light.

A young girl named Anabella celebrated her eighth birthday at Border Tuner. Small crowds on both sides of the border sang "Happy Birthday" in English and Spanish.

"It was really cool for my daughter to be able to experience something this magical on her birthday," said Anabella's mother, Tracy Harris. She said the installation has been a learning opportunity for her two children. "It just kind of hits them like, 'Hey, there's other kids, there's other people over there, and they're like us.'"