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Parkway art project will be big, public, and participatory

A few weeks after Jay-Z's Made in America fence comes down, the Benjamin Franklin Parkway will host another kind of enclosure in the name of art: a canopy of 24 searchlights animated by citizen voices.

Called *Open Air* and conceived by the electronic artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, the light installation's design will be controlled by 30-second voice recordings anyone can make on an iPhone application or online. The website - www.openairphilly.net - went live Thursday, with Lozano-Hemmer in town to explain the project. It will be presented every night from Sept. 20 to Oct. 14.

The artist, who was born in Mexico and lives in Montreal, compared *Open Air* to a light installation he did in Mexico City's Zocalo square in 1999 in which 800,000 people participated.

"Massive participation is what I care about," he said. "If there is no participation, there will be no show. Then I will not return to Philly because I will be too embarrassed."

He said that while Jay-Z's Parkway concert would be about spectacle, his will be about crowd-sourced content.

"In Jay-Z's case, talented performers will perform a show," he said Thursday, looking out at the fenced Parkway from the Park Towne Place Apartments, on whose roofs 12 of 24 robotic search lights will be installed. "In my show, it's the public that performs for the content."

Penny Balkin Bach of the Association for Public Art, which commissioned the world premiere of *Open Air* in conjunction with the 2012 Live Arts and Design Philadelphia festivals, said the two Parkway happenings would help the evolution of the boulevard, which was designed for pedestrians but is dominated by vehicle traffic.

"It was left rather unfinished" in the 1920s, Bach said. "It helps us to understand our public space."

She and Lozano-Hemmer noted that unlike Made in America, everything associated with their installation is free, including WiFi for people on the parkway with iPhones; iPhones will be available for borrowing as well as to record.

The recordings - which the artist hopes will represent a wide range of moods, content and purpose, not just "Yo Philly E-A-G-L-E-S Will You Marry Me" shout-outs - will be processed by software designed by his studio.

The software will translate the intonation, frequency, amplitude, and quality of each voice recording into the movements of the 24 searchlight beams intersecting over the Parkway, which will be visible for a 10-mile radius.

The tightly focused searchlights will use 240 kilowatts of power, but Lozano-Hemmer said the project, which runs on 50 percent renewable fuel, will consume less energy than required for a football game.

In researching the project, he said, he spoke with Philadelphia's "eccentrics, historians, students, and Quakers," all of whom emphasized the city's tradition of free speech (and its sports teams). He said the Quaker tradition of sharing space and rising to speak at meetings for worship influenced him.

"There's this kind of relationship to openness," he said. "The Parkway is lovely, but it's quite empty at night. I hope the end result will be that people come out to public spaces to do something other than shop."

The website also will include curated recordings from well-known Philadelphians, from Santigold to David Lynch, as well as the Eagles fight song and bird calls, the last an homage to the birds whose migratory paths will be interfered with, or at least illuminated, by the project.

If you leave a recording from an iPhone app while on the Parkway, you move to the head of the queue, and the lights will all focus on the GPS-detected location at the start of your design.

You will be notified when your design begins, and people can listen to your voice at the same time through the app or website and at two listening stations, at Eakins Oval and Sister Cities Park.

"It's kind of a scary thing, somewhere between George Orwell and a concert by Prince, but you're the prince," Lozano-Hemmer said. The website will archive the designs and messages as well.

While he says he is prepared for a lot of shoutouts and love notes, Lozano-Hemmer said the site would allow people to rate recordings. "Only highly rated messages will go up to the night sky," he said - and Philadelphians will get priority. "New York will certainly have to wait."

The project will be subject to all levels of discourse. "Moronic content - this is public space," he said. "There is freedom to say whatever you want, but people can vote you down. When you give the public a chance to express themselves, they bring up the level," he added, perhaps hopefully.