

Artwork records words, beams them to Philly skies

September 16 2012, by Joann Loviglio

(AP)—A new interactive artwork opening in Philadelphia will make light of your words, but it's probably not what you think.

Montreal-based artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is preparing to flip the switch on "Open Air," an interactive work that will translate [voice messages](#) into moving [beams of light](#) over a tree-lined parkway named for [Benjamin Franklin](#) in the heart of Philadelphia's cultural district.

Record your soapbox declarations, poems, gripes, wishes and shout-outs of up to 30 seconds on the "Open Air" iPhone app or online, then watch 24 robotic searchlights slowly sweep through the [night sky](#) in patterns and intensity determined by your vocal signature and GPS location.

The spectacle starts Thursday and runs through Oct. 14, from 8-11 p.m. each night.

"Philadelphia has traditions of [free speech](#) and democracy. ... We wanted to take that background and implement technology to visualize it," said Lozano-Hemmer, who was commissioned about four years ago to create the work. "We wanted to take free speech and make it materially visible in the city."

On clear nights, the artist's sky-high vox populi will be visible from 10 miles (16 kilometers) away. His site-specific installations have been presented worldwide, but "Open Air" is his first outdoor searchlight project in the U.S.

Want to beam yourself up? From anywhere in the world, messages can be recorded through the project's website (www.openairphilly.net) or after downloading a free iPhone app debuting Sept. 20. Loaners will be available at on-site locations for the non-[iPhone](#) crowd.

Messages recorded on the parkway—your [smartphone](#)'s GPS gives you away—are automatically bumped to the front of the queue. As the light pattern activates, its originator gets a heads-up on their phone and the canopy of roving searchlights briefly form a dome in the air above the person's location.

Anyone can simultaneously hear the speakers' messages through the Open Air app or website or through two low-volume listening spots on the parkway. Or people can choose to simply watch the silent display as it travels through the air.

Organizers expect the inevitable "Yo, Vinnie!" and "Go Eagles!" exclamations but urge participants to take the opportunity to say something meaningful, funny, inspirational, challenging—and appropriate. Online entries will be kept in check by users' votes; on-site messages won't be censored, but the light [canopy](#) and being visible in the crowd should act to deter offensive comments.

"If you're on the parkway speaking, we all know where you are, and in a way it's pretty much like any public space: If you say something that's moronic, well, other people can see you do that and you self-regulate," Lozano-Hemmer said. "We need to moderate a little bit more online because of the anonymity."

Interspersed among the everyday people will be prerecorded messages from past and present Philadelphians including filmmaker David Lynch, late Phillies baseball announcer Harry Kalas, hip hop artist Santigold and classical pianist Andre Watts. All messages and corresponding light

designs will also be archived on the project website for posterity.

Bird songs also will contribute to the audiovisual mix, a nod to the fall southern migration that coincides with "Open Air." Mindful of the thousands of migrating birds that have become confused and trapped within the beams of New York City's "Tribute of Light" recreation of the Twin Towers, "Open Air" will be periodically turned off to allow any disoriented flyers to continue on the wing.

A key goal was making a work that's as big as the sky overhead also as personal as each individual message. Lozano-Hemmer is mindful of light's power to intimidate as well as illuminate and the relationship of searchlights with both celebration and entrapment.

"There is that fine line between seduction of participation and the violence of Orwellian surveillance and tracking and policing of the people," he said. "The light of enlightenment and the light of blindness."

There are uncertainties inherent in ambitious projects that rely on public participation, however. Despite all the planning and work, what if people don't show up? Lozano-Hemmer and Penny Balkin Bach, executive director of the Association for Public Art, which commissioned the work, are confident that won't be the case.

"We don't know the results—that's what so fascinating about this," Bach said. "We can't wait to see what will happen."

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