

A TRAIN RIDE AWAY...

Nick Cave! Sol Lewitt! Yoko Ono! Ann Hamilton! Jean Shin! Jacob Lawrence!...

These are a few of the artists whose art I have seen in subway stations in New York. Hundreds of artists take part to quietly shape the visual identity of the stations, and many more to come. Renowned artists, well-known local artists, critically acclaimed artists, important artists that redefine an art era, all have something that lives in the subway. It is in the subways in New York that one can touch the arts, not worrying about the presence of guards looming in the background. One doesn't have to worry about the fear of 'accidentally' touching Sol Lewitt's wall painting. Well at least not at 59th St-Columbus Circle, whose mosaic mural "Whirls and twirls" takes shape, completely covering a section of the wall. I was honestly surprised to see his art here. In awe, I stood there for a while, only to excitedly point this novelty to my friend who walked past me, not noticing this wondrous easter egg. A flow of people walked past, no one else noticed nor even gave a glance.

Was I the only one who 'realized' what I just saw?

To a certain extent, maybe. The reason why I knew the artist was through my own interests, and because I have made it my mission to look around, to observe as carefully as possible anything that stands out, especially to spot subway arts that I have either seen on the New York Times, or saw on the internet somewhere. Another factor is the fact that as a non-native to New York, much of the art I have consumed comes from artists working in the city. I am motivated to look for them. With this description of my background, I fit one of James O. Young's, a professor of philosophy at the University of Victoria, definition of an "educated audience", members of which "may need to be familiar with certain facts about art history, styles, and so on to be part of a work's audience" (30). However, when considering the fact that

public works are oftentimes supposed to be consumed by a broader audience, for me to be the only one excited because I am familiar with the art is a problem.

Sol Lewitt's mural at 59th St is also home to the A, C, B, D and 1 line, categorizing it as a transit hub, connecting different lines together, and giving people access to different parts of the city. It is also quite a busy station, with Central Park, and Lincoln Center right around the corner. While some might think the reason why people can't appreciate the art is simply that there is always a constant flow of people wanting to get to their destination and perhaps because of New York's culture of keeping one's eyes to oneself, this doesn't explain why people wouldn't be glancing at these works, especially considering that public arts are meant to be looked at.

I have also noticed that the lack of gaze is not a singular occurrence, but rather something that I have observed in other stations through various points of the day as well. Another mural that goes through this ignorance is a quite recently completed installation by Nick Cave, titled "Each One, Every One, Equal All", at Time-Sq Station, which MTA hailed as "one of the largest mosaic projects in the New York City Transit system" (Each One, Every One, Equal All). As somebody who tries to stay up to date about the contemporary art scene, Nick Cave is arguably one of the most impactful artists creating works right now. Here, the mosaic walls are covered with colorful wearable sculptures called Soundsuits. The mural radiates with lines representing sounds, the outfits excessively dance around, shaking. All of these to be accompanied with flat screens that display videos of these suits in action. I remember the first time seeing the installation in person, struck by how much the visuals connect with the exuberant energy that is expressed right above the station. Another layer of depth is added when I have some knowledge about the topic that drives his work, which is rooted in racism and police brutality, his identity being queer and black, and his choices to be visually inspired by African art and ceremonial

traditions. Sadly, I don't think I have observed somebody actually looking at the installation... In fact, the only time I have seen somebody actively gazing at it was when I physically pointed my finger and turned my head to look at the piece, but that requires initiation from the audience. When there can't be somebody there bringing attention to the work like what we would find in a traditional museum, how can public art as a separate entity, take it upon itself to create this type of engagement?

One way to make for more engaging art can be done through focusing on the input of the audience themselves. Young, when discussing the educated audience, writes “[v]irtually everyone can develop the capacity to appreciate works of a certain sort, and almost everyone can do so fairly rapidly” (32). Throughout the essay, he also talks about how a broad educated audience can help with understanding the value and importance of the work (Young 39). While I agree that when looking at his ideas from a public art perspective, that the opinions of a broad audience should be highly considered, Young hasn't resolved the ways we can expand these visually educated audiences. To bring in another perspective, Adrea Blum, an artist who has public works across the country, raises the question:

What does the public want? Who is the public? And what is our role as artists if we are to interact in a public context? (336)

When considering what Young says on the need to create a broader educated audience, and Blum's questions on “What does the ‘public’ want?” and “Who is the public?” (Blum 336), we must consider the level of exposure that the public received regarding the artworks.

Shelly Willis, a director at Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission, in her article “Investigating the Public Art Commissioning System”, talks about how “[there] are almost never ‘openings’ for a public art piece; it usually just appears” (159). When reflecting at least on how

MTA unveils its artwork, it is never monumental. If we are to do a quick Google search on the recently opened Grand Central Madison station and check the news section, we will quickly realize that the new arts by Yayoi Kusama and Kiki Smith are not actively mentioned and oftentimes stand in the back. When so much about art is stimulating a conversation, if the arts are in public, but nothing comes out of that public, is it even public, or art? What should public art even do?

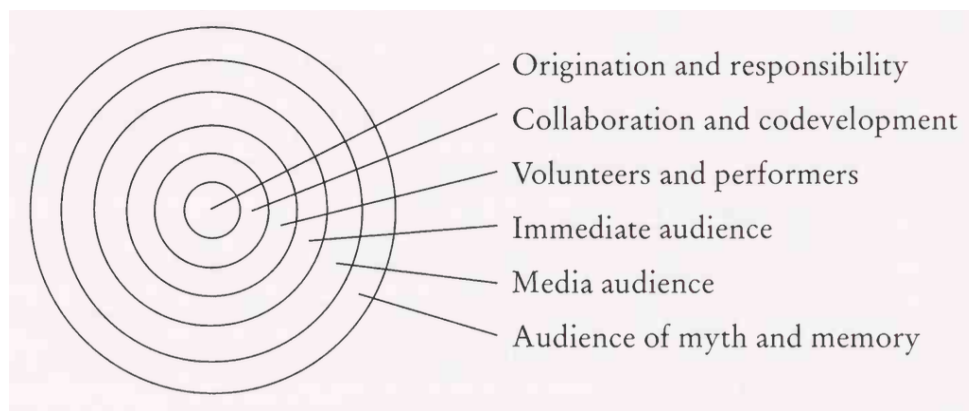
Patricia C Phillips, a scholar who writes heavily on public art, in her piece “Temporality and Public Art”, provides a definition of public art as:

Clearly, public art is not public just because it is out of doors, or in some identifiable civic space, or because it is something that almost everyone can apprehend; it is public because it is a manifestation of art activities and strategies that take the idea of public as the genesis and subject for analysis. (332)

To Phillips, public art redefines what the word “public” means in the first place. It requires heavy analysis and engagement not only from the artist themselves but also from the public. When applying this meaning of public art to the mosaic art murals and installations in various subway stations in the city, I have found that many works have failed to educate or bring the public closer to the arts. For example, Ann Hamilton, a well-known public artist, with her “CHORUS” installation at WTC Cortlandt station, touches on the “social, legal and institutional pillars that underlay cultural life above ground” (Hamilton). While the installation is rich with meaning, when I observe the supposed audience of the work, I find that the mural is often overlooked. As a fan of Hamilton’s works, this saddens me. Although the work is beautiful, the meditative quality that Hamilton brings as an artist didn’t fully materialize into something more. When the artists are ones who meticulously live, who observantly observe, and passionately translate these inner

experiences into visual forms, it is a concern if the audience isn't able to perceive these meanings.

One way to approach the challenge of connecting the audience with the work is by defining clearly what type of audience we are dealing with. It is not simply thinking in terms of the type of people, but rather the level of engagement that they as an audience provides. Suzanne Lacy, an artist known for her socially engaged arts, in her essay "Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art", provided one way we can think about the types of audience is by looking at an archery board-like model, where the closer to the model, the more engaged the audience is to the process (178).



Lacy's model for the types of audience engagement

When considering the roles of audience types and the model that Lacy provides, we begin to notice that with many of the public arts in the subways, the people who the works reach don't exactly fit even in the outer part of the circle. The most engaged audience that arts in stations are getting is "Audience of myth and memory" (Lacy 178), who "experiences the work through reports, documentations, or representation" (Lacy 179). However, the size of this type of audience is small compared to the larger uninitiated audience that the arts could reach.

Public arts in subways should therefore strive to create more “Volunteers and performers” (Lacy 178), people who “for, and with whom the work is created” (Lacy 179). One way to initialize this type of audience is through participatory projects, which are projects that rely on the contributions of the participants in order to shape the meaning of the work. In the past, I have worked on projects that involved collecting the audience’s answers to questions, giving away plants to the visitors, and having them physically contribute to the installation by wrapping donut-shaped pieces with yarn and attaching the finished products to a shared grid. Through these experiences, I’ve found that activities involving audience participation not only allow the project to become more memorable in people’s minds, but also create a stronger engagement with the environment that the installation lives in. While the contribution can be as simple as writing a wish on a piece of paper and hanging it up, the influence of the activity on the participants can even surprise the artists themselves. I do acknowledge that the projects often require constant attention, and are generally harder to maintain especially in public, so these projects often live in museums where their elements are easier to control. When considering the use of the subways, it is vital to consider how we can create and allow for more participatory audiences in the long run, while still acknowledging the concern about the durability and permanence of the works.

One way we can approach this problem is rather than thinking of the installment of the work itself as the final product, to look at public arts as a series of phases. Generally, I have noticed that while phases of construction and planning are apparent to the artists, the commissioners and perhaps a small subset of the community, the public often doesn't physically see the work themselves until the final phase, which is the installation and execution itself. Even with temporary or socially engaged projects, oftentimes, things are already meticulously planned

out. When considering the arts in MTA and how they are processed, rather than simply approving the artist's design and sending it to a fabricator, to rethink the artist's involvement with the subway station where their work is to be installed as a long and engaging performance. This could mean splitting the production of the project over a few intervals. For example, having the artist actively engaged at the station, coming up with smaller and more controllable projects to bring the uninitiated audience in, which could be as simple as asking a random stranger how their day is going, or allowing the audience to simply attach a colored sticker to the wall. The next phase will then be to create something permanent out of the result of the participants. This way of creating can forge a stronger connection between the finished arts and the usual participants of the station. Imagine walking every day and being able to point out that you are the one who chooses that small shard of ceramic to be in that color, at that location. Public art, when done right, can create a sense of pride.

The production of art in public spaces should not only be a matter of placing works there but also allows for a deeper engagement and personal connection of the artist with the space itself in the long run. Artists as producers should therefore strive to foster a relationship with the stations which they are creating. This move will ensure a stronger partnership between artists and train goers, as the people who utilize public transport are very much a part of the environment as well. When New York is constantly changing, the artists will be there to keep the works relevant and timely.

What can artists who are commissioned and chosen by MTA Arts and Design do? What kind of participation can people do while waiting for the train? These creative choices will be based on the context and use of the site. However, through observing the people and the way they seem to perceive public art in subway stations, a systematic way of approaching art in

public is needed in order to make art a more integral part of people's lives. This is even more important when considering how the function and purpose of art are always challenged, as Andrea Blum puts it: "Art, unlike all other professions, is divorced from its context. It becomes the foster child handed back and forth between those who think they know and those who want to know" (337). In order to cement the role of artists, a paradigm shift is necessary when considering what artists' purposes are. Rather than lone creators, artists must now see themselves as social facilitators, performing types of social work through the arts. Only by concretely contributing do other non-artists truly recognize the importance of artists.

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