

Meghan Gibbons
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Assignment 5: AiOP
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Art in Odd Places, (AiOP) an annual grassroots public performance and visual art festival in New York City, was launched in October 2005. Ed Woodham, a multi-disciplinary artist and art educator, is the founder and director of the festival. Originally taking place in the Lower East side and East Village, the festival is now held on the entire stretch of 14th street. Although each annual event has a theme of its own, the common goal of AiOP, as stated on their webpage, www.artinoddplaces.org, is to “stretch the boundaries of communication in the public realm by presenting artworks in all disciplines outside the confines of traditional public space regulations.”

The 2009 AiOP, the festivals second year on 14th Street included 58 projects inspired by the meanings and interpretation of the word “sign”. “Today’s world is full of signs clearly pointing to a need for an adjustment of the status quo, yet life as normal continues on seemingly ignoring them,” said Woodham (Mancuso, Michelle. "Art in Odd Places". New York Times. October 1, 2009.)

A few projects closely related to our class, themed around mapping, the history of Manhattan, and its environment. For example, on Saturday October 17 and 24 Heidi Neilson distributed maps for her project “Urban Forest on 14th Street”, a self-guided walking tour at the Hudson River Park. The guided walk maps out the natural forested landscape of Manhattan in 1609, then Manhatta, and compares it to what can be found today on 14th Street. The project, much in relation to The Manhatta Project, compares today’s ‘Terrestrial Cultural’ subsystem, an ecological community created and maintained by humans to the varied ecosystems of the 1600s.

The map indicates that the spot where the New York Eye & Ear Infirmary is located today was once the Rocky Headwater Stream.

For her project “The Immediate History of 14th Street” artist Bettina Johae documented the lives of 40 different local residents including, shop owners, workers, and street vendors through each individuals memories of experience on 14th Street. She transcribed each story onto signs where they were then displayed in their respective locations. She made a map that shows where these signs can be found, but only 9 of the stories can be read on the actual map. The owner of the Russian Souvenirs shop told his story on how he has seen his business change.

“What is the history? The history is nothing. I have to pay rent. Now people don’t have money. I don’t know how to pay the rent. It is not like it used to be before they destroyed the business. 9/11 destroyed 14th Street. The whole area was better business. A lot of new people. A bar is different. Not like my place. It’s students coming in the bar, don’t buy nothing. Must pay the rent and the electrician. The place is here for over 40 years. Before I worked in the nightclub, in the food store. I worked very hard.”

Our project “Signs of Growth + Mobile Garden” addressed this year’s AiOP theme, and supported the larger goal of the festival; to stretch the standard boundaries of communication and social interaction that cities are often confined to.

As a participant in the performance I anticipated that people would walk by without noticing, avoiding eye contact-- perhaps a few might glance-- going nonchalantly on their way. I was surprised by the amount the often extreme nature of these interactions.

While waiting on the corner of University Place and 14th Street, waiting to cross the street, I had a brief discussion with a man about his hi-tech stroller. Though we spoke about how

much warmer his baby looked in his high-end stroller, he did not once mention my own stroller turned mobile garden full of herbs.

Two enthusiastic college students did come out of their way to approach us. I spoke with them about the premise of our project and answered a few of their questions. They were surprised when I told them that all the plants and soil were bought at the Union Square farmers market across the street.

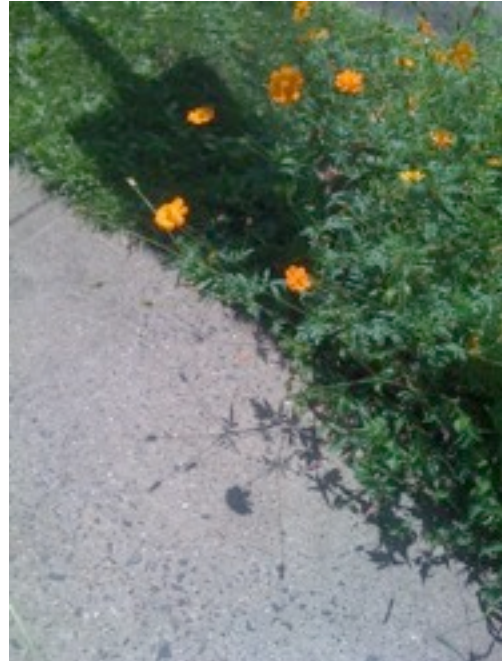
I later saw a couple both walking with strollers who were curious about our project. The man directed a question at slowing down for a moment, but grew impatient waiting for me to answer and continued on his way shouting back that I was taking too long. I caught up with the couple, with my own stroller, and told them about the project while we kept with the pace of the busy avenue.

I think my cart and participation in the project varied from the project as a whole because of the mobile garden I made and my interest in growing your own food. Too many people view gardening as impossible in an urban area.

Gardening obviously has an important effect on our environment, but it can also serve a much more important and intimate purpose. Cities, especially New York, and the people that live there are often perceived as always rushing and impatient while gardening is a slow and patient process. The two may be complete opposites, but perhaps gardening is exactly what cities,



and all people, need. With the cart I made full of edible plants, I found it easy to converse with a lot of people. I think my mobile garden inspired people. The simple idea of having a small pot of rosemary or basil in their kitchen, especially if they could purchase the plants nearby is a fair compromise between the busy life of a New Yorker and the slow and deliberate pace of a gardeners life.



Of the people who did not stop to talk with us, or the ones that did not see us that day, I think our signs have the potential to make a similar impact. Although our exact ideas and purpose of what we believe our project to be cannot be directly communicated without human to human communication, The signs we used served as a type of social interaction to encourage people to take notice of all the empty or ignored places where there could be green.

Artist Michele Brody of “14th Street Manhole Covers” gave one-hour guided tours exploring their historical and contemporary designs. I was excited about her project because, although I admit to getting caught up in the rush of the city, I also am an observant person and take notice of the subtle historical pieces, architecture and art in our city that still serves a functional purpose. I noticed that the



companies that make the manholes put their own label on them. I took a picture of this manhole in September, located near the Lang Building on 11th Street.

Another project I appreciated was “Sign as Site” by artist Billy Friebele. His inspiration was signs, which he considers a form of visual language, that are often ignored, much like the manholes, by people walking by. He traced the shadow of the signs with sand and as time went by the shadow moved and the sand tracings were disrupted by people walking by.

This reminded me of a plant in my neighborhood at home that I passed by around the same time and everyday intrigued by the shadows took pictures. While I took pictures throughout the summer, the angle of the shadow changed with the sun's change of hours in the day. In this picture you can also see a street sign's shadow.

My favorite project was “Invasive Crochet” by fiber artist Crystal Gregory who hand made intricate crocheted lace that stretched between the loops of a barbed wire fence. From afar, I originally thought it was fake spiderweb decorations in anticipation for Halloween. But at a closer look, each yarn piece has its own design in a beautiful, somewhat Victorian styled design. What I found most interesting about this piece was its contrast to the appearance and purpose of the delicate and decorative yarn pieces against the threatening barbed wire fence.

In conclusion, the festival was a to a much larger scale than I expected. I did not see as many of the scheduled performance pieces as I would have liked, but the installation pieces I got to see were beautiful and intriguing.