The Highline Is Trolling Us
By Michael Friedrich | 12 November 2017

New York City’s elevated park boasts a seductive collection of public art, with a striking message about urban displacement.

Visit the High Line this fall and you’ll see a bright tangle of tubes weaving through the brambles at the northern terminus of New York City’s elevated rail park. Like an inscrutable children’s field-day game, it radiates tentacles of Playskool yellow, orange, red, blue, and green along the tracks. Matching these colors in the middle distance is the luxury construction of Hudson Yards, the largest private real estate development in U.S. history.

The match is no accident. High Line Art commissioned the installation, “Hop, Skip, Jump, and Fly: Escape From Gravity” (2017), from Sheila Hicks, and the artist dutifully crafted a work that calls attention to “the ballet of construction vehicles at the Rail Yards; the multitudinous interwoven layers of construction mesh that cover buildings, scaffolding, and streetscapes.”

This scene reflects the strange malfunction of our urban dream of reclamation. The High Line and its artworks exemplify the middle-class cultural objects that have
emerged to obscure the ills of a new Gilded Age. If you’re like me, you love the park. Maybe you visit with your family and friends to see conceptual sculptures and eat little ice cream sandwiches as the sun descends over Frank Gehry’s igloo on the old West Side. But maybe you also notice the neighborhood’s grotesque luxury glut. Even as these objects delight us, they also remind us of the public space we’ve lost and the social inequality they’ve yielded.

The High Line, of course, was conceived with high ideals. Its founders promised us a little utopia in the sky, blending Manhattan’s rough industrial past with pristine textures of public art and prairie grass. That’s pretty much what they gave us. The social geographer David Harvey theorizes a “right to the city,” the idea that citizens deserve a voice in the way public space gets shaped. “[T]he question of what kind of city we want,” Harvey argues, “cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire.” At first blush, the High Line can feel like a true expression of that right.

Born as a passion project, it became a branding experiment. “We started actually trying to promote the idea of a High Line neighborhood, a High Line district,” writes Robert Hammond, the park’s co-founder, reflecting fondly on the revelation that it would return millions in tax revenue. The project has in fact grown up to generate billions in private investment and tax revenue, displacing long-time residents and launching others on hero journeys to preserve affordable housing. What felt like a moral victory has become a symbol of the movement to remake American cities as gated communities for the rich—and a prototype for cities across the globe seeking lucrative uses for artifacts of urban decay.

There’s no slyer emblem of this problem than the public artwork that lines the 1.45-mile track. A late-capitalist chimera, the High Line may have the head of a park, but it’s a museum from the neck down. Alongside Hicks’s work stands “Mutations,” a group exhibition that Cecilia Alemani, the park’s curator, commissioned from contemporary artists including Larry Bamburg, Dora Budor, Marguerite Humeau, Guan Xiao, Max Hooper Schneider, Joanna Malinowska, C.T. Jasper, Jon Rafman, and others. Ostensibly about “how the boundaries between the natural world and culture are defined, crossed, and obliterated,” it’s full of the kinds of artworks people characterize as “playful.”

But, compelling as its images are, the exhibit’s postmodernist practitioners almost reflexively evoke the High Line’s “mutating” neighborhood. Near the shockingly green lawn at W. 23rd Street, for example, visitors shuffle around a sculpted ouroboros, Jon Rafman’s “The Swallower Swallowed” (2017). Rafman’s work, much of it mildly magical, elicits the numb unease of our consensual everyday surveillance—a theme at home on the High Line, where bulging eyes in the sky observe us. This piece, a pastel-splattered hybrid of man and beast, wants to say something about humanity’s place in the “speculative food chain” of a changing world. Surrounded by glittering towers garlanded with LUXURY RENTALS banners, it mostly conjures the social food chain devouring community space.

Overlooking the lawn is a mural—“the floaters” (2017) by Henry Taylor—that spans the entire side of an apartment building. Like Rafman, Taylor is an artist of unflinching
social vision. He’s known for his portraits of black communities, some ultra-mundane and others ultra-confrontational. Here we get a large-scale self-portrait of the sunglassed artist with a faceless white friend in a Palm Springs swimming pool. A pool noodle, like one of the bright limbs of Hicks’s sculpture, supports Taylor in “a moment of pure, leisurely happiness.” It’s an image of a buoyant black middle class, precisely the kind that visits the High Line, and it presents a reassuring multicultural scene. But Taylor’s smile is ironic, his veiled gaze a challenge. In a park that’s “overwhelmingly white,” and a neighborhood that’s getting paler by the year, any reassurance of diversity proves deceptive.

At a glance, the art on the High Line calls to mind Harvey’s demand for urban spaces that embody the “aesthetic values we desire.” No question it’s a seductive high-culture attraction—and a palliative for the pains of post-industrial decline. But it winks at us even as it soothes us, calling our attention to the dislocation the park itself has animated.

This season’s collection is no anomaly. The marquee pieces on display last year pulled the same trick. Tony Matelli’s deeply creepy “Sleepwalker” (2014) was a hyperrealistic sculpture of a middle-aged white man clad only in baggy Hanes briefs, mouth slack and arms thrust forward in zombified catatonia. Surrounded by selfie-dazed visitors, the sleepwalker mostly evinced *us*, the visitors walking the park from end to end, insensate to the human toll of the neighborhood’s new amenities. On the building where Taylor’s piece now shows, a mural by agitprop master Barbara Kruger bludgeoned us with a revised quote from postcolonial philosopher Frantz Fanon: “BLIND IDEALISM IS REACTIONARY SCARY DEADLY.” At a site that so many regard with blind idealism in a district that is, in no subtle sense, being colonized, how could you read those revolutionary words without irony?

Autophagy. Blindness. Somnambulance. Maybe we don’t always register those unflattering themes, but it’s nearly impossible to imagine that Alemani doesn’t. I’ve begun to think the High Line’s art is trolling us. That it’s not so much playful as self-regarding—and deliberately unkind. You could be forgiven for reading the art as a message to less-than-opulent New Yorkers: You’ve lost your place.

What exactly is the point of this provocation? You can imagine a claim to “social commentary.” But its position on the High Line dissolves that contention. The art is part of the High Line’s brand, just as the High Line is part of the neighborhood’s. Far from the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere, where “public opinion can be formed” and “[a]ccess is guaranteed to all citizens,” it’s largely an ad for the development that surrounds it.

By this sleight of hand, contemporary capitalism plods on, dominating our cultural imagination even as it insults and dispossesses us. I think this is all backwards.

Early in September, High Line Art hosted “Threshold,” an “on-going action” by Alexandra Pirici (in other words, a temporary performance piece). On the walkway above the northern rail yard, its personae spread silently across the tracks. It was all very 1970s, what with its feeling of an Allan Kaprow “happening.” Pirici’s work is about Michael Friedrich, City Lab, 12 November 2017
smearing boundaries. Her performers’ bodies, diverse as a Benetton ad, form a “porous” barrier that visitors transgress.

It called to mind other boundaries blurred, those between public and private space. “[A]ttempts to create new kinds of urban commons can all too easily be capitalized upon,” Harvey writes. “In fact they may be designed precisely with that in mind.” The High Line he dismisses summarily: “this kind of public space radically diminishes rather than enhances the potentiality of commoning for all but the very rich.” The High Line has changed our imagination of what urban public space can be. But, in the end, it’s not the public space we think it is. Despite its gestures at softening the cultural boundaries that divide us, it exists to serve the city’s true project: planting surplus money on a fertile terrain.

The sun glared down over the corseted construction of Hudson Yards. As visitors wandered through the performance, the performers sang “Ain’t Got No,” from the musical Hair:

I ain’t got no home, ain’t got no shoes

Ain’t got no money, ain’t got no class

They sang:

Yeah, what have I got

Nobody can take away?

They sang:

I’ve got life, I’ve got my freedom

In their mouths, it sounded like hollow propaganda—something like Orwell’s prole songs from 1984. We don’t need affirmations of our “life,” our “freedom.” These were ours to begin with. Nor do we need more gilded objects in a gilded neighborhood. What we need is community spaces where we can work and gather, live and create. These days, though, we’ll take what we can get.