PART OF A CONDESCENDING BREAKFAST

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Mellow Yellow, Cheryl Farber Smith’s sculpture in Tribeca Park, entered my sightline. I had just returned from a very disappointing trip to the bank (apparently I’m “too young for a thirty-year adjustable mortgage”), but still I was struck by the gleaming reflections bounding off of Mellow Yellow’s many yolk-colored conics. In a way, the sculpture is monotonous: every shape and cog is identical in color, realistically proportioned, and underwhelming compared to its surroundings. However, in many other ways, its incongruity among the grand buildings of Tribeca is what allows Mellow Yellow to truly fulfill its purpose: refereeing the conflict between Tribeca’s past and present.

While it’s currently viewed as an artist-hipster sanctuary, Tribeca used to be an industrial hub for manufacturing and food production. William Grimes, in his New York Times piece “THING;TriBeCa” calls Tribeca a “trapezium” formerly known as “Washington Market, home to wholesale dairy producers, coffee and cocoa companies.” Tribeca gradually outgrew its roots in industry and became the artistic home plate for those who consider private and public art to be their bread-and-butter or any number of breakfast foods.

But this just cracks the shell of what makes Tribeca’s artsy tendencies a perfect center for Mellow Yellow’s egg-yolk goodness. The real conflict between “Tribecans” who consider themselves “industrial” and those who consider themselves “artistic” lies in what Danielle Rice, author of “The ‘Rocky’ Dilemma: Museums, Monuments, and Popular Culture in the Postmodern Era,” calls the “illusion of a universal culture” (263). Rice, in her essay, elaborates upon a far-reaching, yet localized debate on the placement of a Rocky Balboa statue atop the Philadelphia Art Museum’s steps, the same steps made famous for their appearance in the film Rocky. Forged somewhere between the world of public art and pop culture, the Rocky statue’s brief placement depended heavily on what Rice coins “the idealist theory of art,”
where art is assumed to be a “universal language” (263). Rice points out that this perspective “comes into direct and virtually daily conflict with the actual practices of the contemporary art world” (263). After my first encounter with Mellow Yellow, the collision of what I had previously considered stratified and separated temporarily disrupted my own views on the pretentiousness of many art forms.

This condescension, seemingly inherent in many “idealized” art forms, is what Sheril Antonio, a professor of film at New York University, describes as the final destination of art: the audience (Antonio). While many art pieces, such as privately owned or museum-sponsored installations, tend to push those who are less inclined to art’s somewhat unfriendly grasp of “elite culture,” Mellow Yellow avoids this trap. Or, rather, it succeeds in engaging its audience. It welds the past and present Tribeca, combining the artistic inclinations of the neighborhood’s current residents with its industrial legacy. The art, the neighborhood, and its residents are all amalgamated.

Still, I struggled with the complexity of this de-stratification. This newfound perspective, seemingly too dense and deconstructive for any periphery-dweller to entirely comprehend, chased me away from further examining Mellow Yellow. Anyone who has ever learned a new word and then started seeing it everywhere will understand what I mean when I say that once Rice’s elitist theory was thoroughly de-stratified, I began to see other art pieces with this new perspective. I moved away from Mellow Yellow’s egg-yolk center and journeyed to the hard Fabergé shell. I had already joined others at this outer perimeter for New York City’s “Fabergé Big Egg Hunt,” a citywide arts initiative designed not only to celebrate Easter, but also encourage tourists and locals to hunt the five boroughs for these individually crafted, handmade eggs.

Rather strangely, I had first discovered “The Fabergé Big Egg Hunt” midway through my roommate’s rant about the abundant artistic talent of his extended family. As it turns out, an uncle of his had crafted Egg #104, a cabinet-like contraption planted somewhere deep in the heart of Brooklyn. Easter was always a confusing holiday for me, the child of a Jewish mother and an Episcopalian father. However, with Egg #104 as my compass, I felt determined to make amends with Easter.
And so I set off, all for the purpose of resolving thousands of years of religious conflict. The pressure was intense. But how could I expect to bridge two drastically different cultures when interactivity with art almost always escapes me? Am I doomed to follow in the footsteps of Rice and her “‘Rocky’ Dilemma,” clinging to the edges of the artistic periphery, or can I somehow crack the hard, extrinsic Fabergé shell of art?

Then, like the Jews in the desert, wandering hopelessly for something I might never find, salvation found me right in the middle of Brooklyn. But I never found it. Egg #104, designed by the renowned artist My Roommate’s Uncle, remained hidden from me. And so, my forty-minute Easter egg hunt was abandoned, as were my issues with the Episcopal Church, all in one afternoon. Retrospectively, I feel lucky to have allowed “The Fabergé Big Egg Hunt” to help me move away from the periphery, the outer shell, and return to the yolk.

My return to Mellow Yellow began to clarify my struggle with the past and present histories of Tribeca, and with the explosive conflict between arts and industry. Using his visit to an abandoned subway platform to help broaden his own perceptions of New York City’s many sculptural installations, André Aciman, in his essay “False Papers,” explains the notion of sanctity of place and how this notion helps root the rapidly expanding world of public art in a more concrete significance. During his tour, Aciman contemplates the antiquated pieces of a long-forgotten New York City, arguing that every piece of the city’s rich mosaic, “down to an unused subway station, can be touched by time and . . . is ultimately sanctified by time” (225). The sanctity of time and place permeates Aciman’s writings, including his essay “Shadow Cities” on the demolition of Straus Park, a site which reminds him of the fountains in Rome’s many piazzas. Place, in this sense, becomes a means by which Aciman understands and describes public art.

Through Aciman’s perspective, I came to see Tribeca not just as a neighborhood, but as a space for public art. The art it houses (Mellow Yellow and other works) avoids pretentiousness, keeping viewers from the periphery. Vince Carducci, in his essay “Tom Otterness: Public Art and the Civic Ideal in the Postmodern Age,” also uses place to understand sculpture, albeit by a slightly more academic route. Just as Farber Smith tried to initiate the collaboration between art and space in Mellow Yellow, this same interaction
forms the centerpiece of what Carducci believes public art should strive to be. If Aciman’s abandoned subway platform remains entirely affected by time’s sanctifying abilities, Carducci defines public art through Tom Otterness’s sculpture *Trial Scene*. He describes how the work “permeates the ether surrounding the public sphere; but . . . doesn’t condescend” (Carducci). In *Trial Scene*, a depiction of animals conducting the trial of a cat based on the now infamous O.J. Simpson trial and verdict, one can see how Otterness’s sculptures do exactly what Aciman suggests time does to public art: it “permeates” and sanctifies space. However, in a sense, while the space may be made more sanctimonious by Otterness, the true permeation, as Carducci suggests, comes from the “chance encounters between artworks and ordinary people.” The facilitation of these “chance encounters” is “held up as an ideal of public art” (Carducci). However, in my experience with *Mellow Yellow*, these chance encounters can also reflect Aciman’s notion of the ever-growing relationship between art and space. Upon my return to Farber Smith’s sculpture, one such surprising interaction between the spectators and the art occurred, and I fell witness to one of New York City’s natural wonders: street crime.

A man riding a BMX-style bike became a temporary cog in Carducci’s understanding of viewership. The tranquility of the park was abrasively smashed to bits with the high-pitched screams of the bike’s rightful owner as he raced on foot across Canal and all the way down Greene, after a thief who had stolen the bicycle. Every pair of eyes in Tribeca Park quickly glanced away from Farber Smith’s sculpture and refocused inadvertently on the scene rapidly unfolding several blocks away, as the shouts could still be heard traveling down the avenue. The flight of the bicycle thief shifted my attention away from the sculpture. Like public space and art, crime exists everywhere. As the screams echoed loudly up the avenue, *Mellow Yellow* echoed silence in its sanctified space. At this realization, I turned to the plaque commemorating *Mellow Yellow*, and saw that the sculpture was being moved out of the park and New York City. Farber Smith’s egg-yolk structure would soon be gone.

I, like *Mellow Yellow*, am on my way out. No, I don’t have my eye on a nice chestnut casket, but I am about to cross the continent once again. I’m leaving New York City for the sunny shores of Los Angeles, all for the promise of a nine-to-five steady income. Just as Farber Smith’s sculpture will no longer be a piece of Tribeca Park, *Mellow Yellow* will no longer be a part of
me, nor I of it. Yet, our echoes will beat on quietly, like a whisk to pancake batter; there’s something disgusting about it, but in the end, at least you have pancakes.

WORKS CITED


