

Broken Bridge II

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At the Paris Triennial in 2012, Nigeria-based artist El Anatsui covered an entire outside wall of the fun-to-say Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris with mirrors and rusted tin. He named it *Broken Bridge*. An employee of the High Line Art group saw it and thought it would make a perfect addition to the collection of art they've amassed and scattered along the High Line, a mile-long converted freight train track in Manhattan. Anatsui chose a site, reconfigured the piece for a larger area, and a few months later—slipped in between two tall buildings on 21st Street—there was *Broken Bridge II*. It is 37 feet tall, 157 feet wide, and so far as public art goes, it's massive. It isn't, however, intrusive, obnoxious, or even, in fact, immediately noticeable, especially to anyone not 30 feet above ground on the High Line's path. Most of the surface of the flat sculpture consists of patches of recycled, pressed tin folded, bent, and interwoven. Breaking up the rusty, metallic tapestry are immaculate mirrored squares that appear in three formless swirls out of the middle of the rust and run up to the top of the sculpture until they meet the sky they reflect.

From a distance, I imagine the pressed tin would look similar to the walls of the hundred other old buildings in the neighborhood, while the mirrors would be indistinguishable from the sky. If you were on street level, and you didn't know that *Broken Bridge II* was there, it wouldn't exactly catch your eye; walking along the High Line, though, it's impossible to miss, despite the fact that it looks as if it's doing its best to blend in. At the bottom of the rectangular structure the tin creeps out in jagged patches onto the bricks of the building behind it, making the building appear as if it has been eroded to reveal these rusted folds lying underneath. It's as if the art is encroaching on space it wasn't meant to, as if it's slowly enveloping a piece of the urban environment.

We, as viewers, are not accustomed to such aesthetic transgression; the effect it can have on a person is the subject of Mark Doty's essay "The

Panorama Mesdag,” wherein he recounts his visit to another piece of large-scale art. The *Panorama Mesdag* is a 120 meter long painting that encircles viewers so that they can vicariously experience the late-19th-century Dutch seaside that’s painted on the inside. Adding to the illusion, the bottom of the painting has been buried in sand and driftwood to obscure the bottom and dissolve boundaries. As you stand under a thatched roof, which itself is under an oculus in the ceiling, natural light floods the round room and illuminates this edgeless rendering of reality. Doty, although not impressed with the painting itself, is quite struck with the hubris behind its creation. “A great ambition,” he reckons, “to take us inside, for art to subsume reality” (228). He is fascinated with the idea of art that refuses to be held in one place, confined to an area we can easily grasp, and he asks, “What if art refused to stop there, on the museum wall? Wouldn’t the result be revolution?” (228). *Broken Bridge II* performs an impressive feat, simultaneously grabbing the attention of pedestrians with its technical intricacy and camouflaging itself into the wall and the sky, making it difficult at first glance to determine where it ends and where the world begins. It is edgeless and encompassing in the same way as the *Panorama Mesdag*; it feels like the kind of art Doty said “refused to stop,” and yet the High Line doesn’t really feel like a hub of impassioned emotional reactions, let alone the site of a revolution (228).

Emotions of revolutionary caliber are more likely to be experienced in galleries or museums, places people visit with the explicit intention of experiencing art. Visitors are more likely in such places to read the work closely, and to expect themselves to react to it. The heart of a gallery is the art inside it, but outside, in the public arena, our buildings, roads, and parks define the landscape against which everything else comes second, including public art. When it’s up against the structures we need for living and working, public art can feel like decoration. *Broken Bridge II* serves no function other than being an object to look at. If it were in a gallery its appearance would automatically be studied for meaning and no one would ask twice why it was there, but outside the first thing people notice is that it’s not a building, and so its first duty as a piece of art has been to interrupt the urban environment. When art is placed in a public space and so not afforded the reverence and attention gallery pieces receive, it is, in a way, stripped of some of its power to affect people. It’s not giving itself to those who seek it; it’s something to pass by on

the way to the places we need to go. *Broken Bridge II*'s position amongst apartments and offices potentially overshadows its artistic merit.

This is not to say that the High Line is simply a scenic tour of office blocks. Climbing the stairs from 10th Avenue onto the High Line is like walking into rarefied air, and the first thing you notice is how much cleaner and quieter it is 30 feet off the ground, especially if you've just spent hours walking around in the Meatpacking District on streets that always seem to be wet no matter the weather. Before the High Line became the park it is today it was a long disused rail track that sat untouched for decades until 1999 when, just as its rusted, weed-covered remains were threatened with demolition, a group of citizens lobbied the city to transform it into a public park. They won, and in addition to the installation of footpaths and benches, in came the art, "site-specific commissions, exhibitions, performances, video programs and a series of billboard interventions" chosen by the park's full-time curator Cecilia Alemani (High Line Art). Its design boasts a very trendy mix of minimalism and eco-friendly ambience which is visible in the unfinished wood benches, the small cafés that break up the mile long walk, and the original railway sleepers that were taken out, tagged, restored and put back where they had been. The High Line itself feels as if it's under the same kind of tight control as the journey along its narrow unbending path. It seems designed to ensure that all visitors would share an analogous experience by walking the same way, being shown the same art objects in the same order, taking photos, pausing at the café, and then exiting back onto the New York street. *Broken Bridge II* is a piece of this experience, an element of the High Line's "art safari." Aside from a ceiling, there's not a whole lot separating the High Line from the Guggenheim, which on the one hand, could lend *Broken Bridge II* the weight and attention of a gallery piece but, on the other, could potentially undermine its unique status. When your experience in a place such as the High Line is very much controlled by the people responsible for it, after all, every part and every choice they've made feels deliberate, including the introduction of art work, and when art is introduced simply for its own sake and not necessarily as an expression of the artist's emotion and intention, it runs the risk of feeling merely decorative.

How art appears is, of course, subject to the judgement of the individual observing it, but there have been trends when it comes to how the public

views public art, and what exactly its objectives are. Such notions have been constantly evolving since the first NEA-commissioned piece appeared in 1967. In her essay “Sittings of Public Art: Integration versus Intervention,” Miwon Kwon details the evolution of the public’s perception of what public art should accomplish in an examination that spans early pieces, “often enlarged replicas of works,” early pieces normally found in museums and galleries, to where we are now at the “art in-the-public interest model” (5, 4). People expect their public art to make “genuine gestures towards public engagement,” and to offer “aesthetic edification or urban beautification” (8). Altering the aesthetics of a site is one of the easier tasks a work of art has to accomplish, since it only has to be visible and in that space to achieve it. The task of public engagement, however, requires effort on the part of the public; specifically, it requires some form of response, because without a response there can be no interaction. Art that doesn’t engage the public is often criticised as being “at worst . . . an empty trophy commemorating the powers and riches of the dominant class” (8). In other words, art for the sake of art. This is one of the critiques Doty levels against the *Panorama Mesdag*, when he calls it “an immense, flashy commission” (227), aware that the painting’s integrity is compromised by its association with “bourgeois boosterism” (229). Similarly, *Broken Bridge II* is a flashy commission, as well as an enlarged replica of a work, and so it could certainly be interpreted as the kind of art Kwon says we are trying to move away from, the kind that only serves to decorate rather than provoke.

The people *Broken Bridge II* is designed to interest and engage are a mix of tourists wishing to see the city, locals wishing to see the top of their city, and pedestrians looking for a faster way to walk up 10th Avenue. All must squeeze by each other along the concrete path. That such an intermingling of tourists and locals might cause some friction seems a certainty; these tensions are explored in Dean MacCannell’s essay, “Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings.” MacCannell references the work of Erving Goffman and elaborates Goffman’s theories concerning division of space in a given urban area and his approach of dividing areas into “front” and “back.” “The front,” MacCannell reiterates, “is the meeting place of hosts and guests,” while conversely “the back is the place where members of the home team retire between performances” (590). Because

these “front” spaces are constructed to give visitors a positive impression of the community, there is always a certain amount of what MacCannell considers “mystification” at work in them; that is, the intention is “to create a sense of ‘real’ reality” in a place where reality is not the desired outcome (591). If the High Line is considered a “front” space, then *Broken Bridge II* could be considered a component of its mystification; it could be interpreted less as a work of art and more as a functional symbol meant to represent culture at large and help establish the High Line as an “arty” destination.

It wouldn't be the first “arty” destination in New York, and it won't be the last. Another group that works to bring art to the public is called First Street Green, a collective that successfully turned a vacant lot famous for its unholy number of residential rats into a park complete with its own art collection on East 1st Street. One of the two parks on 1st Street is empty, open and centered on a tall, rusted iron sculpture by Robert Sestok. The other is cluttered and full of plants and trees. They aren't the kinds of places high on the tourist to-do lists. Instead, they seem as if they were purposefully built for residents of the area who want to look at art in nature instead of a colony of rats. Goffman's theory of the division of space, when applied to these two parks, helps one imagine what the initial response may have been to First Street Park, small and tucked between two apartment buildings, and a representative of the “back” region, as opposed to the High Line's trendy “front.” A few visits to the renovated rail line, though, provide evidence that complicates Goffman's idea. During some of my trips I watched constant streams of tourists move in crowds so thick everyone had to travel at a constant, shuffling pace. On another trip, the path was freed up, as the few people there were families sticking to the edges while building snow sculptures for a High Line-organized competition. In the mornings there are joggers braving Hudson River winds. In the afternoons people with briefcases take the scenic route home. Weekends are packed and weekdays are more peaceful. Those enjoying the High Line at any point in time are in a constant state of flux, and although this is particularly true of this park, it is also true of many other outdoor settings. *Broken Bridge II* might feel more like a gift bestowed upon New York City's visitors and art buffs alike than a token “front” space monstrosity if you take into account the complexities of the site: Goffman's division of space, it turns out, is more problematic to put into practice than to theorize

with. In the case of New York City, packed as it is with tourists and inhabitants, there simply isn't enough room to indulge in wholly divided spaces.

About 100 yards down the road from *Broken Bridge II* stands Allen Ruppersberg's striking *You & Me*, another High Line Art commission. It is a billboard covered in blown up versions of Ruppersberg's rainbow-bright posters that say to the viewer in huge black font phrases like "Me and me and you and you." It's aggressively eye-catching, and as it sits, billboard-sized and angled towards motorists and pedestrians, it certainly receives more attention than *Broken Bridge II*. *You & Me*'s bright colors explode out from amongst Chelsea's subdued industrial facades, but it's hard to imagine High Line Art expected a similar visual punch in *Broken Bridge II* when it flew El Anatsui all the way from Nigeria. Did someone really stand in Chelsea, the world's largest concentration of art galleries, and say, "What this community needs is more art to look at"? Probably not. Do we expect public art merely to sit while we observe? Do we require it to surrender its fascinating, dazzling essence to as large an audience as possible with the least amount of effort asked of us lest we brand it an overly-academic waste of time and money? Public art is capable of achieving more than art in a gallery can achieve, because it has more materials at its disposal than just those that comprise its form; it has the entire outside world to draw from. *This* is where *Broken Bridge II* succeeds as public art, and where other kinds fail. *You & Me* is designed to be seen, confined to its frame while the bright colors mingle with each other, trapped, as they are, in a grey landscape; you can look in, then look away. *Broken Bridge II* is more complicated than that.

At the very top of the sculpture it's tricky to see exactly where the mirrors of the sculpture end and the sky begins. You can discern where it ends, because your eyes can follow the line of the roof, but staring at those identical hues of blue you might as well be staring at an unbroken plane. Anatsui wanted his sculpture to give New York City something its own design and density rarely permits: open sky. Also reflected in the mirrors is a wobbly replica of the Manhattan skyline, including the tip of the Empire State Building, so that from certain vantage points we may peer into an alternate reality in which New York is more open and breezy, and New Jersey has its own Empire State Building. Gazing at *Broken Bridge II* reveals the intricacies of the sculpture and its evocations of traditional tapestry techniques. Looking at the plaque

next to it reveals its statement about consumerism and Anatsui's predilection for using recycled materials sourced from his town. Standing in its presence, however, reveals a space full of tensions you wouldn't have seen had you looked at it too closely and not acknowledged the surroundings of the sliver of space it occupies. Only when you take it all in can you see how its ability to blend seamlessly into the Chelsea environment is at odds with its enormous size, how its glistening mirrors look identical to the silvery, futuristic buildings dotted around the High Line while its rust and decay recall the age and history slowly being erased from the area. The way there's sky where there shouldn't be, and buildings where they shouldn't be, and despite how you might think you had become desensitized to the look and feel of this city, this building, which appears to be fading in and out of existence, throws time and space askew. *Broken Bridge II* represents the kind of public art that doesn't just give to the public a simple message, a cultural reference, or even an uncomplicated aesthetic beauty worthy of only marginal attention. There is a constant flow of give and take and distortion between art and space as the pressed tin continues to rust alongside old Chelsea fences and the mirrors throw the image of a city at that particular point in time back at itself. Half of *Broken Bridge II* is falling back into the past while the other half is moving forward in real time with the rest of us, and it's this disruption of time and space that makes it such a captivating piece.

Doty saw something similar at work in Mesdag's *Panorama*: "It wishes to place you in the center of a moment, wishes to colonize your attention for a while, while time seems held in suspension" (229). For him, it was a difficult painting to pin down, evoking comparison with other illusion-based Dutch art, such as *anamorphosis*, one of "those peculiar paintings that are unreadable till reflected in a curving mirror" (230). *Broken Bridge II* is unreadable until it is given a city to subsume. The sculpture would be entirely different if it were placed inside the Guggenheim's white walls with no old buildings to grow against and no skyline to remake. The best kind of public art doesn't make itself the best by simply being outdoors, nor does it achieve anything through being seen by the most people. Public art should move time and space the way something in a gallery, confined to itself by the sterility of its surroundings, never could. "Walls are meant to block views," remarked Anatsui, "but they only block the view of the eye—the ocular view—not the imaginative

view” (Brooklyn Museum). Anatsui created a wall that opens up more space than it could ever close off. It forces you to engage with your environment and use your imagination, skills easily forgotten when living in a visually repetitive urban space. All public art should strive to reengage the public, not just in regard to their city, but also in regard to their own ability to think creatively. Every piece of public art runs the risk of becoming just an attractive spanner in the inner-city works, but if it can achieve the level of engagement with its environment that *Broken Bridge II* has achieved, then it has justified its placement away from the galleries in the outside world, and no one can say, regardless of the connotations of the space it inhabits, that it’s just decoration.

Now that I’ve revisited this space so many times, *Broken Bridge II* doesn’t look like an art installation anymore. It looks as if it grew out of the High Line over the span of a few decades, like a virus that eats away at buildings, causing them to decompose until they disappear. In a few months, when summer ends, *Broken Bridge II* will end its residency and disappear, and I only hope that it gets to live somewhere else, so its beauty can eat away at, while transforming, someone else’s city.

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