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Experiential Art Puts a Song in People's Path

Singers are serenading unsuspecting parkgoers near New York City Hall this summer



A singer tries to engage with people at City Hall Park in Manhattan as part of 'The Language of Things' exhibition. *PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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It may be the quiet season inside City Hall, but some surprisingly lilting sounds are wafting through its surrounding park this summer. Their source: a rotating cast of “living sculptures” who serve up surreptitious, personalized serenades.

Parkgoers in recent days have been greeted with songs by the Beatles, Beyoncé, Barbra Streisand and Earth, Wind & Fire. Others have heard hits by Frank Sinatra and Marvin Gaye. One visitor, returning to survey the scene, was treated to a performance of Dionne Warwick’s “Déjà Vu.”

The experiential artwork, “This You,” is performed daily, from sunrise to sunset, by a rotating corps of solo singers whose presence is unmarked and unknown. Conceived by artist Tino Seghal, it is part of an exhibition of seven works of provocative sculptural art

on view through Sept. 29 around the lower Manhattan park, in a group show called “The Language of Things.”

“If somebody is moving really quickly, I might sing, ‘Slow down, you move too fast,’ ” said Nikki Neretin, one of 19 women hired to perform the musical piece by Mr. Sehgal. “Or some people look like they’re visiting, so I’ll sing a New York song.”

“It’s the aura that you feel from people,” Stephanie Mitchell, another singer, said of her inspiration for song choices.



‘The Italian Bunnies,’ by the Swiss artist Claudia Comte, is installed at City Hall Park in Manhattan. *PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Both women were selected to give life to the piece by Mr. Sehgal, an enigmatic Berlin-based artist known for staging “constructed situations” that involve direct engagement with the public.

One such work, in 2010, involved clearing the rotunda of the Guggenheim Museum and letting loose a cast of interpreters to draw museumgoers in conversation, in an empty environment. For “This You,” he brought different kinds of interactions outdoors.

“You don’t necessarily have people’s attention,” Mr. Sehgal said of staging an artwork outside. “You have to get people’s attention.”

The singers, all women aged 40 to 70, were hired after auditioning their voices and otherwise were supplied with little instruction beyond a charge to sing a song, any song, in response to passersby.

People interpreting other people is personal, Mr. Sehgal said, and singing makes the intimacy hard to hide.

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“Singing comes out of the depths of the body and [goes] quite into somebody else,” the artist said. “To me, what’s important is this kind of mirror effect: When we meet each other, we immediately form a sense of somebody that goes beyond words.”

Ways of communicating beyond spoken or written conventions reflect a key theme for “The Language of Things,” an exhibition devoted to different kinds of wordless exchange. The title alludes to an essay by the German philosopher and theorist Walter Benjamin, but the aim is more universal, according to Public Art Fund associate curator Emma Enderby.

“Everyone looks for patterns in the world around us and tries to understand things that are being communicated,” she said. “It’s something we do innately.”

Other works in the show take on more material sculptural forms.

“The Italian Bunnies,” a work by the Swiss artist Claudia Comte, sits on a patch of grass, with seven curved white shapes carved from prized Carrara marble—the same Italian stone revered by Michelangelo—and weighing a total of 14 tons.

“They all have a kind of character and express different moods,” Ms. Comte said of the component parts, named collectively for their rabbit-like demeanor. “I love that they can look so cartoonish but at the same time come from this amazing marble.”

“I did not get bunnies,” said Melanie O’Meara, a City Hall Park regular on break from an office nearby. “It looks like the lawn is eating people.”

“Lingam,” a sculpture by Carol Bove, comprises large steel beams juxtaposed with a piece of petrified wood many millions of years old.

“The material speaks a language of direct experience,” Ms. Bove said, “in interaction with the fact that you know it’s unfathomably old.”



Adam Pendleton's 'Untitled (Code Poem)' at City Hall Park. *PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Seeming to strike up an uncanny dialogue between ancient wood and modern-age metal, the materials “speak beyond their form,” the artist added.

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Another work, “Ring Angels” by Chris Watson, features four stereo speakers that make sound its main material. Known as a wildlife sound recordist, he focuses in this piece on the noise created by flocks of birds flying together in swirling, pulsating patterns across the sky.

The work, said Ms. Enderby, reflects a human desire for “trying to understand forms of communication that exist outside our reach or outside our realm.”

Amanda Switzer, a New Yorker eating lunch in the park, seemed to agree.

“It sounds like the nature,” she said, “that doesn’t exist here.”

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