

*High Line Art as a Mediator of Social Constructs and Change in NYC*

A relatively young New York City park, the High Line is host to elaborate flora displays, curated art installations and a growing throng of daily visitors along its elevated path. However despite the daily bustle, the High Line as a structured green space inherently reveals the divide between various economic cultures and their respective members – defined here as the seen versus unseen. Mike Nelson's 2016 installation, *Untitled (public sculpture for redundant space)*, underlines this contrast by confronting casual viewers with questions about who visits the park and for what reasons. Nelson's sleeping bags, submerged in the undergrowth, prompt viewers to reconsider status, cultural activities, and the overall purpose of the park while disrupting the High Line's usual anesthetized reality.

The daytime environment of the park caters to those who can afford leisure time strolling along the pathway. Members of the more affluent classes – with fancy cameras and name brand clothes – mix seamlessly together in the curated park that has been designed with them in mind. The High Line is elevated above the street level and accommodates those who do not want to blend into the busy sidewalks below, raising them to both a new physical level and symbolic status. High Line walkers are lifted up above street life onto an avenue in the sky where there are unobstructed views of the city, the river, and New Jersey. Park goers see the city from a unique advantage but are also provided an extremely intimate view of New York and the inhabitants who live in expensive apartments along the High Line. The path is narrow and so the view into these wealthy lifestyles is relatively unobstructed, almost eye-to-eye. However, the viewership works both ways. The apartment dwellers and other members of wealthy society look

back at the High Line visitors, who in turn have allowed themselves to be seen up close. With the narrow walkway and dual paths of viewership, the High Line in a sense, acts as a runway for those who can afford to display themselves. Visitors are also free to spend additional time shopping at high-end stores, eating luxury food, and visiting expensive museums in the area. Their manner of dress also easily distinguishes them from the workers below or functional daily commuters who utilize the High Line, and signal a lifestyle unbound by economic stress.

The park environment during the day is carefully managed, making for a safe experience. As visitors ascend from several access points on the walkway, they are presented with a list of what they should not do while in the park. The rules are extensive and prohibit activities from picking flowers to using glass bottles. There is to be no amplified sound, throwing objects, or walking on anything but the designated path. Visitors can drink alcohol but only in specific concession areas.<sup>1</sup> Dogs and smoking are not allowed and are the rules most often broken, according to a Friends of the High Line worker.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the park has a strict closing time at which the various access points are gated and locked until the next morning. These rules of the High Line mean that the activities in the park are heavily supervised and specifically dictated for its participants, whether they realize it or not. Those who visit the High Line are unconsciously subscribing to this unspoken social contract. Perhaps they have not explicitly read the list of rules, but clearly they do understand the expected behavior while on the High Line. This creates an anesthetized form of reality. Staff members scattered along the park's two-mile pathway monitor visitors and their actions. Additional signage and materials on the website and along the physical path offer High Line visitors activities like yoga,

meditation, stargazing, and guided tours. It is clear what type of leisure activities will be tolerated. The same Friends of the High Line worker relayed that visitors of the High Line are often accommodating of the rules and rarely break them knowingly. As a whole, reprimanding visitors rarely happens and the staff deal with issues quickly and quietly.<sup>3</sup> This attitude towards visitors is open and cordial, but there is little doubt that the environment is carefully watched throughout the day.

In contrast, parks during the nighttime often tell different stories. Instead of catering to those with excess time and money, parks shift into spaces of utility for the lower economic classes and their own cultural values and activities. As an example, many members of the homeless community inhabit parks as a place for rest. For New York City municipal leaders, this behavior of the homeless continues to be seen as a prevalent problem.<sup>4</sup> While the homeless are technically just visitors to the parks, many rules of the New York City park system are worded to prohibit them from occupying the areas. Each rule is carefully worded and while some are catered towards the more casual park goer, many are pointedly phrased towards the homeless. As an example, “No person shall use a bench or other sitting area so as to interfere with its use by other persons, including storing any materials thereon” is general enough to apply to most but, when reread seems to directly target those who might need to sleep on park benches.<sup>5</sup> The rules imply a clear class differentiation in the parks and also relay a social code for how each member of their respective societies should treat the green space.

With these highly detailed rules in place for the greater New York City community, there is no denying that the homelessness in parks is considered a problem and an inconvenience for aesthetic and safety reasons. However, the homeless are not the

only members of a less visible culture that are dismissed by more affluent classes. While the homeless try to dissolve into the shadows when needed, other members of the general society also occupy a peripheral existence. Parks cater to the needs of this working class and become a place to sell food, various trinkets or to play music in turn for a small payment. These people are often also unseen by the “daytime” park visitors who choose to pass by without offering help. While these workers also exist on the periphery of park, they, like the homeless, are less willing to subscribe to the set of rules that more affluent people unconsciously agree to. They fight to live just outside the rules in order to survive - to not be noticed by the rules. They tread the line between unseen park goers and the seen, more wealthy visitors.

This peripheral life describes stereotypical nighttime park life in New York City, but alienates the High Line as it is unique in the fact that its elevation does not attract a large homeless population. It is also a private New York City park, which further raises its cultural status. As shared by a park official through email, homeless people do not often occupy the park and he seemed surprised to think that it could even be a major issue.<sup>6</sup> During a visit to the High Line, another worker confirmed this fact. She said that while the High Line is host to dense foliage, it is completely “unprotected to the elements, which isn’t helpful to the homeless.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, when the park entrances are gated and closed for the night, rangers are required to conduct a thorough sweep of the premises in order to completely clear the park.<sup>8</sup> Other city parks cannot be methodically emptied or patrolled in this way. This information confirms that homelessness does not present itself in the same way at the High Line as in other New

York City parks. However, the High Line still reflects a divide of cultures present in the city's society, through its architecture and the art installed there.

As discussed, the park invites and caters to more affluent members of the population. Yet beyond its relationships to visitors, the High Line's architectural structure also underlines a separation of wealth. Near the intersection of the park with 26<sup>th</sup> street, the High Line divides, creating two levels of pathways. Further emphasizing this divide in structure, art dots both the upper and lower track lines, engaging visitors with further questions about the divide, what it could mean and through that, realizations about park life itself.

The Wanderlust installation as series of land art sculptures, emphasizes the act of walking, journeys and pilgrimages.<sup>9</sup> The curatorial staff, led by Cecilia Alemani, asked the contributing artists to “think of creative ways to engage with the uniqueness of the architecture, history, and design of the High Line and to foster a productive dialogue with the surrounding neighborhood and urban landscape.”<sup>10</sup> The installations are scattered throughout the High Line. Mike Nelson's installation at the intersection of the park with 26<sup>th</sup> street, at the site of the architectural divide, is one of the installations that attracts less attention due to its placement on the lower track. The lower section is closed to visitors and relatively overgrown, hides in shadows underneath the elevated walkway. *Untitled (public sculpture for redundant space)* rests among the shrubbery, weighted down by rubble and waits for the elevated visitors to notice.

Mike Nelson, the artist of *Untitled (public sculpture for redundant space)*, is a British artist who creates landscape sculptures from rubble and discarded materials. His work confronts the line between “land art and empathetic figurative sculpture” and often

suggests a narrative between the installation and its surroundings. Nelson creates work that touches on land art's psychological aspects and more specifically how its viewers are immediately affected. An artist who is interested in materials and figures from the fringes of society, Nelson is aware that his work reveals truths about even the most basic cultural activities.<sup>11</sup>

*Untitled (public structure for redundant space)* brings together many aspects of Mike Nelson's interests. The site, which was chosen by the artist, reflects a pause in the walking journey along the High Line.<sup>12</sup> The work itself is composed of three sleeping bags filled with found debris from around and below the park. The debris includes construction rubble from surrounding building sites and pieces of old installation work that are no longer on display.<sup>13</sup> The bags are slightly engulfed by the shrubbery, which continues to grow around the installation. Painted on top of the sleeping bags are graffiti-like markings. The installation itself lies on the fringes of the park. It is placed north of the busiest section of the High Line, but also on an inaccessible level to the public. The sleeping bags vary in color and are completely exposed to the elements, which means the installation has evolved since its introduction last year.

Only a few visitors notice the lower layer of the park and even less stop to see the trio of sleeping bags. Often just one person looking over the edge prompts others to join them. In conversation about the Wanderlust series, a Friends of the High Line worker mentioned that the sleeping bags create a "quiet murmur" of conversation when people notice the installation.<sup>14</sup> Although it is less physically intrusive than other installations currently on the High Line, it seems to raise more questions from the viewers. The art affects even the most basic cultural activities of walking and forces visitors to pause their

journey along the High Line, a theme Mike Nelson tackles with his work. Alemani, the curator, has said that a few people have even called alerting the team that someone is living on the High Line and should be removed.<sup>15</sup> With the knowledge that the homeless community does not often venture up on the High Line, the image of sleeping bags is even more startling. Because it is a novel image to this specific park, the work raises more general questions about homelessness in New York City parks and why the High Line's space is unique. Nelson's installation is smart in its effort to underline this question alongside the uneasy divide of different cultures and classes. He acknowledges that more affluent class systems rise above the underbelly of the park system. The people who identify in that group are willing to be seen and have ample time to display themselves and engage within this environment. They unknowingly walk up the ramp elevating themselves above other sections of the High Line. Of course this self-elevation is usually unconscious, which is why the emergence of the sleeping bags is so disconcerting. The act of looking down upon the installation and confronting the questions that arise, reveals the intrinsic truth and modes of thought that affect basic cultural activities like walking, which is an act shared by almost all members of society regardless of status.

Through his work, *Untitled (public structure for redundant space)*, Mike Nelson politicizes walking and the High Line as a park with the images of rubble filled sleeping bags alongside attributes of expensive lifestyles. By recognizing differences in status and cultural values, he breaks open the divide and reveals the less curated and manicured side of New York City park life that is not necessarily obvious at first glance. In general, conversations about art become political when they involve a discussion of communal

space. Every communal space in New York is now highly regulated due to previous problems often surrounding the homeless and their behaviors.<sup>16</sup> Unique in its structure and mission, the High Line's rules are more visible because there is a clear lack of rule breakage. Everyone who visits the elevated park system falls in line with each other and obeys rules they might not even know about, supporting social norms and values that are important to more affluent classes. As highly visible and "seen" members of society, they easily conform to the prescribed lifestyle the High Line curates. While pleasant for visitors, it does raise questions about why people visit parks and for what purpose. When a park is visited out of necessity that immediately changes its function. Instead of host leisurely activity, the park is now a home or a bed or just a place for an unseen sleeping bag. Nelson's artful sleeping bags at the High Line mirror this complexity, especially when the apartments next door are worth hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars.

So, how does one mediate these two experiences, especially in a concentrated green space like the High Line? High Line Art as a program is one of the facilitators in this instance through the curated installations. While static in nature, the presence of visual art initiates and facilitates the conversations about class divide and the separation of wealth. Without the placement of art, the High Line becomes just another highly regulated green space - as the curatorial staff is well aware. Mike Nelson's work, *Untitled (public structure for redundant space)*, is just one of many pieces within the Wanderlust collection but it is one that creates a conversation highlighting this specific class struggle. Other works in the series are often seen as just a photo opportunity and tourists become "giddy" with excitement about the strange objects intruding on their otherwise regulated High Line experience.<sup>17</sup> The sleeping bags are a little subtler in nature but without fail

once noticed, create a conversation about the art and its presence. These questions raised by the public will hopefully facilitate a change in viewership of art and people, with respect to economic cultures on both ends of the spectrum of wealth.

The High Line as a structured green space can be an example of all common space in New York City. It has its differences due to its private funding and relatively young age, but still represents a large population of New York City's demographics. In 2015 about 7.6 million people visited the High Line and about 2.3 million were New Yorkers. Clearly the High Line is a well-loved and highly utilized place hosting a variety of people, plants, and art. It is unique in its lack of unseen individuals, like the homeless, but also with its strong presence of installation artwork that does not exist in other parks. The physical art also makes the High Line special because it challenges the park goes beyond a casual stroll. The next stage of the park's life will be about the impact of the art and how it might change the rules and social expectations of New York City park life. Perhaps the influx of interest in public art will alert officials to the demographics of each park and how the art can facilitate the unseen populations that also utilize the space. Usable and utilitarian art can be just as valid in public spaces and can even cater towards specific class systems to help them better their situation. Whether that will be successful in a metropolitan area where there is an understanding that art is for more visible and wealthy members of society is another issue. However, there is precedent for a shift in ideology for how parks can exist within a city. The late Jane Jacobs, an activist and writer about urban areas, believed that public space in cities were vital to the overall success of neighborhoods. Parks, the buildings that surround them and the people who inhabit the area all function together in a type of metropolitan ecosystem. Public green space is

undoubtedly a large contributor to how people interact with their living space within this ecosystem<sup>18</sup>. Mike Nelson's work successfully highlights and extends this conversation into the present by asking people to think more about their cultural values in relation to communal spaces. His specific installation, *Untitled (public structure for redundant space)* suggests a change in the activities various members of society can partake in on the High Line, and on a much larger scale, questions the overall purpose of parks in New York City.

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When I started researching Mike Nelson's sleeping bags, I knew that my composition work could relate to the installation. I found the site both physically interesting and supportive to movement. So, as I crafted my research into a paper, I also started developing my ideas for the showing using new techniques from composition class in combination with my prior experience with improvisation. For the showing, I intended to bring light to this structural divide on 26<sup>th</sup> street. I was not interested in imitating homelessness but rather would try to activate the space in new ways. I also knew that while I was willing to break the rules of the High Line, I did not want to create a spectacle and was going to quietly perform to a small audience and then leave the space relatively untouched. Over a five-minute duration, I planned to use my flashlight to illuminate the faces of the audience above me while I wandered in and out of sight. My path would weave from the maintenance gate to the sleeping bags and back, slowly disappearing out of sight. I created a soundscape for myself of footsteps, voices and wind along the High Line to time my journey. I also wrote a list of improvisational scores that

related to how my body could fit into the structure of where I was and also how I could move in and out of the audience's view.

That is not exactly what happened on the day. However, sometimes a forced change in performance creates a better situation than you could have imagined. I definitely learned that last Monday on the High Line. When I walked into the area of my planned performance, I ended up walking in High Line workers and knew immediately that I was not going to impose on their workspace. Despite that set back, I think that having to quickly improvise a new situation that mirrored the one I had in my head, revitalized my plan and presented a new set of challenges I did not anticipate. I actually think that the sudden change in perspective made the piece stronger overall. The split decision to have the audience stand on benches while looking down through the slats on my performance added a level of discomfort I would not have achieved if they remained on the path. It not only raised the audience to an elevated level, but because they had to squeeze onto the really narrow bench it heightened the situation as I moved in between them, which in turn affected their viewership of my movement.

As I mentioned in the feedback session afterwards, I would not mind revisiting the site to repeat the scores I set for myself in that new space. Because I devised improvisation scores for myself in the original space, I then had to make the quick decision to reinterpret them for the new, smaller space. That meant that I was working with really raw ideas during the performance, which in hindsight could definitely be fleshed out to make the piece stronger as a whole. I know I could have let moments linger for a longer amount of time and not rushed to activate the entire the space.

Another reason why I think I could repeat the process of performing the piece is because during the showing I was thinking a lot about the validity of the switch in location and not much about the embodiment of the movement and my reaction to the physical space. I would also want to figure out how to act less within the movement. While I really was discovering the setting for the first time, it led to an innocence of movement that I think weakened the work. Instead of being preoccupied by the sudden change in location, if I repeated my set of scores, I could find a more honest and blunt truth behind the movement, which I think the space deserves. I also I think I could find more movement to force the uncomfortable for both me as a performer and the audience by integrating my movement into their elevated positioning.

Despite not being in my planned location, I think that separating my movement from Mike Nelson's sleeping bags stopped the work from becoming repetitive structurally and physically. Overall, in combination with several quick changes in movement and location, I do think my site-specific showing was successful in activating a typically unused space. To be able to raise the audience above me and shine a light into spaces not usually illuminated was my overarching goal and the movement I performed only further enhanced that idea.

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<sup>1</sup> "Visit the High Line | Friends of the High Line." The High Line. Accessed September 30, 2016. <http://www.thehighline.org/visit/#/access>.

<sup>2</sup> "Questions about the High Line." Interview by author. October 1, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> "Questions about the High Line." Interview by author. October 1, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Wilson Kitchheimer. 1989 "Sheltering the Homeless in New York City: Expansion in an Era of Government Contraction." *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 4:607-23. doi:10.2307/2151101.

<sup>5</sup> "§1-04 Prohibited Uses." NYC Parks. Accessed September 29, 2016. <https://www.nycgovparks.org/rules/section-1-04>.

<sup>6</sup> Cub Barrett. "Re: Student Inquiry." E-mail message to author. September 27, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> "Questions about the High Line." Interview by author. October 1, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Cub Barrett. "Re: Student Inquiry." E-mail message to author. September 27, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> "A Walking Tour of New York's High Line with Cecilia Alemani." 2016. The Art Newspaper - News. Accessed October 02, 2016. <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/a-walking-tour-of-new-york-s-high-line-with-cecilia-alemani/>.

<sup>10</sup> "About - High Line Art." High Line Art. Accessed September 28, 2016. <http://art.thehighline.org/about/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Mike Nelson - Biography." 303 Gallery. Accessed October 02, 2016. <http://www.303gallery.com/artists/mike-nelson/biography>.

<sup>12</sup> "Questions about the High Line." Interview by author. October 1, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> "A Walking Tour of New York's High Line with Cecilia Alemani." 2016. The Art Newspaper - News. Accessed October 02, 2016. <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/a-walking-tour-of-new-york-s-high-line-with-cecilia-alemani/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Questions about the High Line." Interview by author. October 1, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> "A Walking Tour of New York's High Line with Cecilia Alemani." 2016. The Art Newspaper - News. <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/a-walking-tour-of-new-york-s-high-line-with-cecilia-alemani/>.

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<sup>16</sup> Arline Matheiu. 1993. "The Medicalization of Homelessness and the Theater of Repression." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 7, 2: 170-84.  
doi:10.1525/maq.1993.7.2.02a00030.

<sup>17</sup> "Questions about the High Line." Interview by author. October 1, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> "Jane Jacobs - Project for Public Spaces." 2016. Project for Public Spaces.  
<http://www.pps.org/reference/jjacobs-2/>.