



Art As the Space Between the Sign and the Sculpture

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by Sandra Hale Schulman

New York City is one of the best walking towns in the world. Streets go east-west, avenues north-south, and Broadway slashes through it. Things get jangled by the historical events that shaped lower Manhattan below 14th Street, but vibrant, odd-angled neighborhoods are the happy result. Uptown and down, the space for public art and imagination is limitless.

On my way to give a weekly walking tour about the art history of Greenwich Village, I came out of the Astor Place subway stop and something strange caught my eye. Mustard yellow signs affixed to almost every utility pole in a two-block area depicted works of art in what looked like Xeroxed black and white. The artworks were accompanied by an arrow and a number denoting distance inside the yellow ochre frames. And nothing else.



“Art within One Mile” installation by Bundith Phunsombatlert. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Some pieces I recognized—the [George Segal statues in Christopher Park](#), for example—and some I did not: a bicycle chained to a street sign in one instance

What could it mean? I started darting corner to corner, from one sign to the next to get a clue, snapping pictures along the way. Finally I came upon a second type of sign, this one with a map of lower Manhattan, affixed to a pole below a sign showing Tony Rosenthal's [Alamo](#).



“Art within One Mile” installation by Bundith Phunsombatlert. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

Quickly visiting on my smart phone the [artwithinonemile.com](#) website listed on the sign, I

discovered the work of Bundith Phunsombatlert, a Thai artist who works in the limbo realm of public art and interactive installations. He partnered with the NYC Department of Transportation Urban Art Program and the DOT's larger "Summer Streets" project (nyc.gov/summerstreets) to create *Art within One Mile*--a public participatory piece presenting 80 signs guiding the way to a personal, curated selection of 46 pieces of temporary and permanent public art around the Summer Streets route from Central Park to the Brooklyn Bridge.

All the art in the *Art within One Mile* is located within a one-mile radius of the route, with groupings of public artwork indicated on the special map signs put up at five intervals along Park Avenue and then Lafayette Street down to the Brooklyn Bridge. *Art within One Mile* remains on view through September.



"Art within One Mile" installation by Bundith Phunsombatlert. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

But for three Saturdays (August 3, 10, and 17) when the larger "play, run, walk and bike" project was open from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. during the "Summer Streets" project, and the 6.9 mile route from Central Park to the Brooklyn Bridge included three additional public art installations.

One installation was *Voice Tunnel*, an interactive light and sound installation by Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer inside the Park Avenue Tunnel. This was opened to pedestrians for the first time in its history.

The Course of Emotions: a mini-golf experience, an interactive art installation by Risa Punow was sited at the 51st Street and Park Avenue rest stop. *CoolStop*, a prototype water-misting installation by Chat Travieso, offered a splash of relief from the heat for Summer Streets visitors at the Foley Square rest stop.

["Summer Streets"](#) is an annual celebration of New York City's public spaces--it's streets--and provided additional opportunities for people to enjoy them. "Summer Streets" is sponsored by the New York City Department of Transportation.

While the rational purpose, like that of any sign, is to get you to a destination, in this instance, the artist is making the sign and the journey a part of the experience of the art. Or maybe the sign itself, pointing the way, is the art. Viewers get to decide for themselves.

"The space between the audience and the artwork is the artwork itself," Mr. Phunsombatlert told the [Wall Street Journal](#). "My work is about the gap."

The artist expands on the concept in the artist's statement on his website, bundithphunsombatlert.com: "I invite the audience to participate, to feel, to think, and to build their own experience through both old and new media."



“Art within One Mile” installation by Bundith Phunsombatlert. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

When Phunsombatlert arrived in New York from Bangkok in 2007, he walked constantly. Because his English was not the best, he used public art as a way to mark his bearings. The various objects he encountered—painted white bicycles chained to a fence to mark where a cyclist had died; bronze bollards controlling traffic on Wall Street; the 1898 giant bronze eagle atop the entrance to Grand Central Terminal; a beehive in Battery Park—these things were all art, too, he decided.

Phunsombatlert accomplished the entire *Art within One Mile* project for less than \$7,000, including the DOT printing and attaching the aluminum signs. The images of public art were sketched, not photographed. Only a few are accompanied by the map and website sign, giving it all a more abstract feel.

Phunsombatlert used the GPS on his phone to get the distances and chose the yellow color to match city taxis, he said, and to give the signs an “official” look. But even when you get to the art—if that’s the goal—there isn’t a flashing sign indicating that you’ve arrived. It may be three stories high or two feet tall, hidden in a park or perched atop a building.



“Art within One Mile” installation by Bundith Phunsombatlert. Photo by Sandra Hale Schulman.

I stood and watched the flow of people going past the signs for a while. Most just hurried past, perhaps assuming they were a different kind of traffic sign, but some who stopped really stopped. And looked. And then looked past the sign in the direction of the arrow to see what they could see. It was both funny and fascinating.

Phunsombatlert’s *Art within One Mile* has been so successful that the artist has been invited to extend it to other boroughs next year, the artist wrote in an email. He is in fundraising mode now, accepting donations under the nonprofit umbrellas of the Queens Museum and the New York Foundation for the Arts.

Phunsombatlert is scouting art and landmarks in Brooklyn and Queens. He already knows that one will be the giant steel globe “Unisphere,” designed by landscape architect Gilmore Clarke for the 1964 World’s Fair, in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.

“It’s a form of generosity, a gesture toward an environment, like New York, that’s rich in a way that sometimes we take for granted,” Prerana Reddy, director of public events for the Queens Museum, was quoted as saying in the same [Wall Street Journal article](#). “It’s a way of recuperating our hidden heritage, our hidden richness.”



The artist with DOT Installers. Photo courtesy NYDOT.

BASIC FACTS: *Art within One Mile* by Bundith Phunsombatlert remains on view through September 2013. The project presents 80 signs leading to 46 temporary or permanent public artworks within one mile from 5 different rest stops of “Summer Streets”, NYC Department of Transportation’s Urban Art Program.

The rest stops are located along the route from Central Park to the Brooklyn Bridge. They are located as follows: Uptown: 51st St. & Park Ave.; Midtown: 25th St. & Park Ave.; Astor Pl.: Astor Pl. & Lafayette St.; SoHo: Spring St. & Lafayette St.; and Foley Sq.: Duane St. & Centre St.

An interactive map of *Art within One Mile* can be viewed at www.artwithinonemile.com.

The project questions how a journey within a specific geographic sphere can be a work of art in and of itself, according to the website. The audience participates in this project by experiencing their own journey traveling to each art piece.

For information on *Art within One Mile* and artist Bundith Phunsombatlert, visit www.bundithphunsombatlert.com.

