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New Voices, Animal Instincts for the Highline

by brienne walsh 06/13/11

Since it opened in 2009, the High Line—the park on a former elevated railway line above 10th Avenue—has become one of the most popular tourist destinations in New York. Visited by over two million people annually, the garden has gradually ramped up its efforts to show large-scale public art. This week, a second phase of the project—which now runs from 14th Street to 30th Street—opened to much fanfare.



Unveiled along the new pathways were two new installations: a sculptural aviary by Sarah Sze, and a sound piece by Julianne Swartz. "It was about framing what already exists," Lauren Ross, the High Line's director of arts programs, told A.I.A of the commission.

Sze's *Behavior and Its Evidence* (2011) flanks either side of the pedestrian path between 20th and 21st streets. Constructed from stainless steel rods and wood, it bears schematic resemblance to Sol Lewitt's modular cube sculptures. Beginning at a single vanishing point along the wooden pathway of the park, the structure climbs vertically into the air, exploding like the cross-section of some firework display, in some cases only a few feet from adjacent buildings.

Sze describes her sculpture as a "model for a habitat," and her grid is occasionally interrupted by metal containers perch delicately on the slender supports. Intended to serve as water troughs, nesting areas and feeders for the birds, butterflies and insects that Sze hopes to attract, the boxes make a miniature version of Habitat 67, Moshe Safdie's experimental housing complex built in Montreal in 1967.

The morning of the opening last week, the piece had yet to be inhabited. "I just don't know if birds will nest," Sze mused. "But urban birds are scrappy. They live in air conditioners and gutters, so why not here?" When asked how she envisioned the experiment, she joked, "As more of a community center than a housing complex. Or a restaurant. Or a bar."

Unlike Sze's sculpture, a scientific experiment to be observed by a public audience, Swartz's sound piece, *Digital Empathy* (2011) is almost uncomfortably intimate. Installed at 11 water fountains, elevators and bathroom sinks throughout the park, the installation consists of both male and female computer voices that cajole, flatter, sing, recite poetry and deliver instructions to visitors as they use the designated services. The specific locations are marked by recognizable signage for "water fountain" or "sink" graphically altered with pink hearts.

Picking up on the prevalence of digitally-rendered voices, Swartz's piece is either a reflection of the benevolence of the High Line, or a critique of the way that our lives are controlled in public. "We are deeply

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concerned about your health and well-being," a voice says at a water fountain. "Drink freely, however, please do not lick the fountain. We want to keep this facility free of germs."

Before I left the park, Ross and I rode the 15th Street elevator up and down a few times. Unsurprisingly, the adults who boarded with us barely seemed to notice the voices, inured to aural distractions and commands. But young children looked up at the speakers with awe, searching for the source of the voices singing phrases like "life will be a delight." One particularly outspoken tween wrinkled her nose as she disembarked. "This is weird," she said to her brother, and then ran off giggling into the urban refuge as soon as the doors opened.

Ross, who has been with the Friends of the High Line for two years, will depart at the end of the month to assume a new position as the Nancy E. Meining Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Philbrook Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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