

The Artist and the Subway

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ABSTRACT: For both visitors and natives, the geography of New York City can be challenging to navigate. Literally divided into dozens of islands, with its only mainland connection via The Bronx, the Five Boroughs present different kinds of landmasses that millions experience daily—living in, visiting, escaping from, transiting, and utilizing them. Not only has the Subway System become a key aspect and symbol of New York’s culture, but it has also become infamous on a national scale. Uniting all since the early 1900s has been the Subway System, which continues to inspire, frustrate, challenge, alienate and envelop modern artists of every kind to his day. Through various sources and the thoughts/words of postwar artists Yoko Ono, Ellie Kayu Ng, Keith Haring, and James Yang, we have explored the New York Subway and its openness for interpretation. Out of countless post-war artists who have included the Subway in their artwork, we have chosen to compare and contrast a few artists who have utilized the subway in differing ways in their art. The Subway System has been depicted and interpreted in countless ways to communicate its promise, aesthetic, democratic spirit, kinetics and, of course, connectivity. Ultimately, we have come to the conclusion that Subway can be interpreted in endless ways, allowing artists to form differing views, feelings, and meanings from the same subject, in this case, the Subway.

KEYWORDS: art, artist, interpretation, post-war, subway

Introduction

For both the visitor and native, the geography of New York City can be challenging. Literally divided into dozens of islands, with its only mainland connection via The Bronx, the Five Boroughs present different kinds of landmasses that, for millions daily, are lived in, visited, escaped from, transited, and utilized. Uniting all since the early 1900s has been the Subway System, which continues to inspire, frustrate, challenge, alienate and envelop modern artists of every kind. The Subway system has been depicted and interpreted in countless ways to communicate its promise, aesthetic, democratic spirit, kinetics and, of course, connectivity. Postwar artists Yoko Ono, Ellie Kayu Ng, Keith Haring, and James Yang have all been inspired by it in different manners.

Yoko Ono and The Subway

The system has been dramatically praised and strongly condemned. Modern artist Yoko Ono claims that “...the subway is a living canvas, a gallery of diverse stories and experiences. It’s where art meets humanity in motion.” Ono also considers the system as more or less of a great leveler, a living network in motion bringing together humanity in all of its forms and classes (Chung 2018). Over the decades, Ono has utilized the subway as her canvas, particularly for her mosaic pieces. In 2018, she collaborated with the Metropolitan Transit Authority to complete a series of six mosaics that highlighted blue sky scenes. Ono wanted to bring the majesty of the open sky to some of the city’s busiest subway lines, to remind the rider of the wider world and its majestic dome that unites us all. She also sought to use the artwork as a memorial to her late husband, John Lennon, an artistic dynamo unto himself during his living years in the music industry (Chouinard 2018).

For Ono, the Subway means, first and foremost, *freedom*. It provides the pedestrian with an almost superpowered tool to promote motion, connectivity and curiosity. It is an *empowering* mechanism. "The subway is a constant reminder of the resilience and spirit of

New York City. It's a place where dreams collide, and the ordinary becomes extraordinary. It's my endless source of inspiration and the heartbeat of this vibrant metropolis" (Chouinard 2018). Ono has used the subway system to wander and feels extremely grateful for the anonymity it's afforded her over the decades. Let's face it: she remains an *extremely* recognizable person in many settings. So the idea that she can more or less 'mask up' and embark upon an urban journey has long been a liberating one. "The Subway is a sanctuary of anonymity," she's stated, "where strangers share intimate moments without ever speaking a word. It's a testament to the unspoken connections that bind us all" (Chouinard 2018).

Ono also perceives New York's subway network as a system of infinite possibilities and gateways. With over 750 stations and lines that are still under construction, the ever-expanding system is home of thousands of artworks, advertisements, video displays, performance spaces, entries and exits to neighborhoods and institutions. "The subway is a canvas of expressions, a tapestry of dreams. Each station is an active portal to countless possibilities, inviting us to imagine a better world as we journey through the underground labyrinth" (Hood 2004).

Ng and New York's Underworld

New York's subterranean network has also inspired other artists in their quest for self-expression and their connection to the city. Painter Ellie Kayu Ng has crafted complicated portraits and depictions. Her renditions of the subway utilize color, texture and scene to provide a degree of almost photo-realistic accuracy while simultaneously utilizing hue and tone to communicate mood, motion and place (Ng n.d.).

In *My Train of Thought*, Ng treats us to what is either a reflection or view into a subway train window. Here she's in a fantastic position, practically wrapped around one of the train's steel poles and dressed elaborately as if she's on her way to some kind of formal event. She's obviously in a moment of serious contemplation or fantasy, but what could she be thinking about? Lights from different parts of the journey are reflected around her, giving the scene a sense of motion and direction. One can almost hear the roar of the train as it *bolts* its way through the city's underground world. And yet, there are two worlds at work here: the cement and steel environment of the subway and the vast recesses of the artist's mind. They are simultaneously connected and co-dependent, yet comprised of entirely differing substances. The organic and inorganic have temporarily connected to form something greater, something empowering and communicative (Ng n.d.).

Also notable in *My Train of Thought* is the way the artist presents her physical form. She's elongated, stretched out, blissfully extended. She's navigating the system's passages at high speed and in a heightened state of glamor. There are no limitations here; there's only movement, freedom and possibility. The viewer is left to wonder where she's going. To a party on Manhattan's Upper East Side? Perhaps to the Met to catch one of Mozart's operas. Maybe she's en route to a romantic meeting at a Brooklyn Coffeehouse? Or what is she thinking? What world has *swallowed* her up amongst the hypnotic sounds of the subway? (Ng n.d.).

Ng continues her contemplation of the subway and its inhabitants in her work *Lonely Together*. Here we see what looks like a couple gesturing dramatically on a platform while waiting for a train to arrive. Examined individually, each figure seems completely immersed in some kind of moment or performance and frozen in the moment. They're obviously embedded in some other reality and, like many of us, are having a moment of dramatic fantasy in an otherwise ordinary spot. Perhaps they're being adored by their own fantastical respective audiences, with standing ovations all around. But the reality of the situation is much more ordinary, as they pose with great zest on a raised platform far over a busy city street, bathed in yellowish light that fills the entire scene with its moody hue (Ng n.d.).

Both scenes strongly explore the interplay between inner and outer worlds, the clanging dynamics of the subway network and the Walter Mitty-like fantasies that riders experience as a result of the system's unrelenting visual patterns and rhythms. Our figures are using the subway for different reasons. All for travel, of course, but also as a place for *fantasy* and realization. "The subway is a place where people can let go of their inhibitions and be themselves," asserts Ng. She also claims it is a place of contrasts, where individuals can experience loneliness and isolation amid impressive, rapid, even *clanking* connectivity (Ng n.d.).

Haring's Love Affair With The Subway

The New York Subway has various aspects that inspire artists in different ways; for artist Keith Haring, he noticed and admired the fact that the Subway was - and still remains - a "cross section of humanity that cut across all boundaries" (Haring 2023). A wide variety of people regardless of occupation, race, gender, upbringing, character, and destination, all use the Subway (Haring 2023). Haring himself started to become familiar with the New York Subway when he moved to New York at twenty years old as an "observer" of public art. Rather than the chaos of the Subway, he was "attracted to the subway graffiti" and admired its display of various artistic abilities and understanding of artistic elements. For him, the Subway became something he could admire in his everyday life, almost like a museum of sorts (Haring 2023).

Aware that many believe that the only way to enjoy art is to make time during the day to visit a museum or an exhibit, Haring wanted to create art for as many people as possible to view and enjoy on a regular basis similar to how he admired others' graffiti art. With the hustle and bustle of New York's cities, it is not often that people slow down to enjoy the simple things in life. After seeing other artists contribute to the beautification of the Subway, Haring joined the community, beginning to create stylized line drawings with chalk, leaving the viewers to interpret the pieces for themselves. His growing fondness for this new tradition and the admiration of the artwork by viewers pushed Haring to continue creating graffiti art in the subways whenever an advertisement panel was left blank for a few days in order to foster an appreciation for art in public (Haring 2023).

The Subway also contains (and sometimes entombs) various communities. Whether the riders of the Subway realize it or not, the fact remains they're linked by the enormous system to get from point to point. For many, they take the same trains every day at the same times as a consistent part of their routines, riding with strangers they have taken the Subway with possibly hundreds or thousands of times. Artistic communities have formed as well; the graffiti art community that Haring joined when he began embellishing the Subway links the artists through a mutual respect for each other's works and effort to share the beauty of art to the public (Haring 2023).

The sharing of art in the form of graffiti has led to an increased appreciation for the arts as well; even the police officers who fined or handcuffed Haring admitted their fondness for his art. This universal admiration of not only Haring's, but other artists' work fuels the passion for artmaking in the Subway. Despite how short-lived the designs were, Haring felt that "even if a drawing only remained up for only one day, enough people saw it to make it easily worth my effort" (Haring 2023). Like Ono, Haring is also one of the many artists who use Subway stations as canvases for their art, dedicating themselves to decorating a symbol of and capturing the spirit of New York City.

Yang's Subway Car Artwork

There is art in unexpected areas as well, such as inside the Subway cars themselves. One artist who decorates Subway cars with his artwork is James Yang. As a way to create a "momentary sense of calm or zen" (Yang 2023), Yang was asked by the Metropolitan Transit Authority to

create wallpapers for the inside of subway train cars. The cars with these design features allow commuters to be fully immersed in and feel the zen effect of the designs that cover the doors, walls, and ceiling (Yang 2023). Featuring images of the New York skyline and subway cars, Yang encapsulated elements of the New York subway in a simple way that would enhance the cars with designs relating to their location. Having thought of the charismatic idea of portraying “catching lines” (Yang), Yang designed subway cars with nets on the top of the cars, catching colorful circles that represent the lines one could “catch” on the Subway (Yang 2023).

The Subway, being a major mode of transportation for residents of New York, tourists, and commuters, is often chaotic and stressful, especially for those not used to the environment. Knowing this, the Metropolitan Transit Authority requested the calming artwork for the insides of the cars. Depending on the person, the notoriously crowded subway can be either exhilarating or daunting; with this additional effort to help some travelers, hopefully they can feel some release of tension. Yang’s artwork could also create a sense of belonging or tranquility for riders on the way to an important meeting or interview.

As previously mentioned, the Subway is used by people from all walks of life, but a commonality between many of these people is that they take the subway as a way of commuting to work. James Yang specifically mentioned creating a peaceful moment “during a commute;” he took his artwork as a way to help people relieve stress before a full day of work (Yang 2023)

Conclusion

As long as there have been trains and subways, artists have been creating works to praise, observe, exemplify, criticize, and ennoble them. Ono herself acknowledges that her works could be interpreted as a complement to those of her late husband’s songs about such subjects. John Lennon and the Beatles wrote hundreds of songs, of course, and some of their most famous works are either about trains or reference them. Two examples particularly come to mind here. The first could be “Ticket To Ride,” where the Lennon-led song laments about a girl that’s obviously leaving on a train to go somewhere far away from the boy who loves her. The other could certainly be “The Ballad of John and Yoko,” which is not only about how the couple is constantly misunderstood by fans and the popular press but specifically mentions constant travel and trains. It could be argued that both songs also have a kind of locomotive tempo to them suggesting the rhythmic, even hypnotic movement of a train on the rails. And when it comes to considering hypnosis, one cannot forget “Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds,” which describes a sort of ‘ideal’ and fantastical train station, colorful turnstiles included.

Ng’s considerations of the subway are almost entirely different from Ono’s. Instead of presenting elements of the outside world to remind the Subway rider of their part in the wider world (via her *Blue Sky* murals), for Ng, individuals are like ‘creatures of the night’ that utilize the subway to express their spirit and even seductive nature (as in “My Train of Thought”). Yang plugs into the ‘spirit’ of the Subway as well, but primarily concerns his work with all-surrounding color and playful interpretations of the system fonts, symbols and overall aesthetic. He seeks to directly enrich the lives of riders and remind them of the marvel of the network. In this age of Climate Change, cities all over the world, from New York to Hangzhou, are spending billions modernizing and expanding their subways and rail systems. The Age of the Car in the City is *over*, and there is no doubt that the relationship between artists, riders, and subways will continue for many decades to come (Abbey-Lamberts 2015).

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