



# Everybody's Secret

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Looking through a window of a New York City subway car, one might notice flickering lights darting across the tunnel or the instantaneous imagery of a passing train's interior. In the 1970s, a young artist and filmmaker named Bill Brand conceived of an artwork that would repurpose this common observation. What might appear and disappear within the blink of an eye could contain within it a cinematic experience for the attentive observer. With this in mind, *Masstransiscope* was formulated as a filmic public artwork to be installed along the tunnel of the subway.

With funding from the public art organization Creative Time, Brand approached the MTA (Metropolitan Transit Authority) in the late 1970s with the proposal. “I think it was such a preposterous idea that no one bothered to say no,” he described to a reporter. “So they just kept having the next meeting, and then we built it.”<sup>1</sup> The artwork was installed along the platform of the unused former Myrtle Avenue station in Downtown Brooklyn. Visible along the Q and B train lines, it can be seen after leaving the Dekalb Avenue station in Brooklyn en route towards Canal Street in Manhattan. Passing riders might briefly witness its sequence of colorful kinetic imagery, conjoining the city and cinema.

Public art is often associated with sculptural mediums like statues and monuments or with painted murals. *Masstransiscope* is situated more towards “public art which is neither monument nor an artwork in a museum.”<sup>2</sup> Motivated to reformulate the medium of stationary public artwork, Brand created a public moving image. To do this, the installation borrowed principles of the pre-cinema 19th-century zoetrope device to create an animation effect. Brand remarked, “It’s a reversal of the normal film process where you sit in the theater and the film passes through the projector. Here, the film sits still, and you pass by it.”<sup>3</sup> The artwork unraveled the cylindrical structure of the zoetrope – where the images revolve on the interior and slits around the exterior provide visibility inwards – onto the length of the subway platform. The animation’s frames were then painted onto 228 reflective panels stretching 300 feet across the platform. Visible through narrow vertical slits along a built enclosure, the paintings are illuminated by fluorescent lights mounted inside on either side of the slits. When looking out of a window on a passing train, a viewer’s eye scans the partially visible intermittent images generating the illusion of motion between frames.

Before creating the artwork at scale, Brand set out to create a device that would demonstrate his fundamental

idea to the project’s partners and allow him to test and develop the artwork’s moving imagery. Recognizing that running back and forth to test the animation effect would be unreliable, he devised a machine to simulate the viewing experience in the subway. Within this table-sized model painted like a subway car and visible through a small window, a motorized band of slits and parallel scroll of the animation’s sketches rotated at a speed controlled by Brand. This way he was able to test how the artwork would be seen as a train passed, slowed, or stopped along the way. After engineering the device and developing the framework, Brand began to collaborate with perceptual psychologists, lighting designers, engineers, a machinist, an architect, and the painter Theresa DeSalvio over the next three years.<sup>4</sup>



Throughout the process, ambitions led the project in directions that, though unrealized, shaped its development and final outcome. Originally, Brand intended to regularly interchange blown-up photographs to create a shifting filmstrip that would eventually comprise a film-length piece over months and years of viewings. This phenomenon of filmic art that involves the audience and environment in its own creation would situate *Masstransiscope* along the lineage of “expanded cinema” – a term coined by Sheldon Renan in 1967

and theorized by Gene Youngblood in 1970 in a book of the same name. However, the labor involved with this plan would have been overwhelming and the photographic subtlety and complexity less visible from passing trains. Brand determined that brightly colored graphic painted imagery would register more clearly in motion. So, with a new approach to the piece's visual style, the essential ideas of the piece remained in place.



Much like the endless stimulus encountered while moving through New York's public spaces, the artwork's imagery was generated by Brand using the process of free-association. The painted panels begin with abstract shapes. A circle appears and then is enveloped by lines and proceeds to explode. It moves on to a landscape figuration that unfolds, dissipating and morphing again into a rocket taking off. Slowly reforming through figuration in the last few panels, the imagery concludes into the enveloping darkness of the subway tunnel. These paintings, somewhat crude in their childlike form, might be interpreted as a depiction of birth, life, evolutionary advancement, death, and even re-birth – a cycle as cylindrical as a zoetrope. Despite their non-narrative approach, it is through precision that their crudeness affords their confident wonder. Brand's panels play out an exalting abstract depiction of life across a momentary burst of

time. This experience is quintessentially New York – a seeming lifetime of moments unfolding within view in seconds while navigating the city's frenetic environments.



In order to realize the artwork, Brand partnered with various organizations such as the recently founded public arts organization Creative Time. With the slogan "art where you least expect it," Creative Time helped raise funding and secured materials from other civic and corporate sponsors. At the time, in the late-70s, the MTA had yet to have any kind of public arts program in place, let alone funding for such projects. It wasn't until a capital rehabilitation program in 1985 that the MTA's public art commission would be founded. Although the MTA was able to help identify and provide the installation site for the work. The unused Myrtle Avenue subway stop platform, closed in 1956 due to re-routed train lines, was chosen as a suitable location. Trains still passed through the former station on their way towards Manhattan after leaving the Dekalb Avenue station. Beyond New York, the project would become the first completed public art project in any US transit facility funded by the NEA's Art in Public Places program.<sup>5</sup> The artwork's installation was eventually completed and set to open to the public in September of 1980.



On the morning of the artwork's unveiling, Bill Brand was nervous. The opening to the public had garnered the attention of TV crews, journalists, and the media. Despite having meticulously tested the artwork with his prototype in his studio, Brand still had yet to view the installed artwork from a subway car. He would see his "movie" along with everyone else for the first time. "The truth is I didn't really 100% know it was going to work until the day it opened. I was still installing it the morning of the opening when all the officials were there and the television cameras. It was scary but it was exciting."<sup>6</sup> His excitement was shared by the public. Passengers on the train remarked at the flickering stream of colorful images before them. The reception was important to Brand, although not for obvious reasons. Having worked as an experimental filmmaker, most of his works

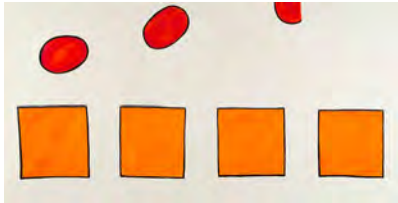


were experienced in obscurity with small audiences. "While I was thinking about what makes a film fundamentally a film, I was also asking myself, what does audience have to do with how I think as an artist?"<sup>7</sup> Similarly to reversing the film process to produce the artwork, Brand reversed the size of his audience to the general public of New York City to engage this curiosity.

*Masstranscope* was joyfully encountered by subway passengers throughout the 80s, but as years passed the issue of maintaining the permanent artwork arose. While Creative Time had facilitated funding to produce the project, it was unable to oversee its subsequent maintenance. Due to this and the then graffiti-covered environment of the subway, Brand anticipated such challenges. The panels were created with graffiti-proof coating to help preserve the original artwork, and Brand left behind a message for underground taggers: "Leave this alone." "For five years, it didn't get hit," he recounted.<sup>8</sup> But by the mid-80s, it became obscured by layers of graffiti, dirt, and broken fluorescent lights. Brand, having been slipped an MTA key by someone during installation, would occasionally visit the piece to repair it, but the task was insurmountable for one person. Over the following decades, the piece gradually receded into the darkness of the tunnel, hiding in plain sight. In 2008 and 2013, it finally received two major restorations which renewed its original colorful hyperactive state with hopes to ensure its longevity.

The evolution of the city's media landscape between installation and restoration was significant to Brand. "When I was restoring it in 2008, I wondered how it would be understood now that moving image billboards have saturated the city's public space. I was gratified to discover that it still works like a secret artwork and that no one mistakes it for advertising."<sup>9</sup> Despite the proliferation of moving images around us, Brand's artwork holds up in not resembling commercial imagery, either then or now – although *Masstranscope* was not created explicitly to critique commercial advertising either. This is impressive given New York's position as an epicenter of global capital, which might encourage one to take polarizing stances one way or the other on such subjects. Rather, Brand's artwork sits at the periphery, both literally and figuratively. It forgoes a placard with basic

information, like most public art or artworks in galleries and museums provide. Instead, it only asks you of your presence and attention among the frenzy of transport. In return, you may be transported elsewhere altogether, however briefly or repeatedly over time.

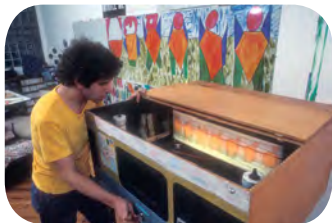


The now four decade plus life of *Masstranscope* has ingrained itself into a certain niche of New York City's psyche. The artwork has been on view long enough to become a memorable part of people's childhood and into their adult life. A casual internet search can produce amateur videos of the animation from passing trains with endless comments professing anecdotal memories of the subway and city from long ago to now. Listening to the background of these videos, you can hear similar comments from riders noticing the animation and calling attention to it. But as is customary on the New York City subway, some prefer not to be bothered and don't look up from their phones or books to notice the briefly-visible artwork. Some might catch a glimpse of the work without knowing its origins or the artist. This phenomenon of the merging between personal and public led to Brand's new understanding of the work. "The experience of viewing it is very private. It's not announced, you have to be looking to see it. So, it's very public, but it's everybody's secret."<sup>10</sup>

Taking time to observe the artwork in its current state, I rode the train in loops one morning recently to catch glimpses of it through the window. As I watched the colorful images flash by, I recognized a friend that was sitting just to the left of the window. As we moved seats to speak, she commented that while she's lived along the train line for years, and despite having noticed the artwork countless times, she wasn't aware of its origins or the artist. She's not alone. Many friends and acquaintances I've spoken to can recall it clearly when described, perhaps enthusiastically, but typically its appearance and little else. These rich trails, intertwining anonymity and memory, extend outward like the subway sys-



tem itself. Moving past the bright artwork and back into the obscurity of the tunnel, I contemplate what mechanism of cinema the observer might represent in this experiential process. Emerging from the darkness, the subway car passes over the bridge towards Lower Manhattan. The bridge's vertical and angled metal beams now act as a different type of zoetrope architecture – one that allows the moving image of the city to pass between in full cinematic vision. — END



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