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Art

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“Office Semaphore”
An installation by Nina Katchadourian
Through Jan. 14
One Chase Manhattan Plaza
Corner of Liberty and William Streets
Publicartfund.org

our latest family addition:



Downtown Express photo by Jefferson Siegel

The Interpreter: Nina Katchadourian and her looking glass

Message in a 17th-story office window

By Harry Newman

Nina Katchadourian steps in front of the blue tourist telescope that’s part of “Office Semaphore,” her interactive, site-specific art installation that’s ending its two-month stay in the northeast corner of Chase Manhattan Plaza on Jan. 14.

“It should be very sharp,” she says about the image, wiping the telescope’s lens with the cuff

of her sweater, before returning to the eye piece. “Now, let’s see what it says.”

“Office Semaphore” uses the old maritime flag signaling system as a jumping off point to explore our need for communication and the distances between individuals in the city. Instead of communicating between ships, messages are sent from an anonymous office to the street below. Instead of flags folded and held in different positions, arrangements of obscure and everyday objects on the office windowsill provide the code. The message “I am drifting,” for instance, is a combination of a container of binder clips, a potted plant, and a calculator; “Directions received but not understood” consists of a bottle of wine, a jar of markers, and a framed photograph; and “Keep clear of me” juxtaposes a photo, binder clips, and an odd, apple pie-shaped potpourri holder (a gift from a co-worker).

This morning, Katchadourian sees a desk clock, a box of tissues, and a legal pad. She runs her finger across the pictorial viewers’ guide that’s attached to the telescope stand to find the meaning: “Ending maneuvers early.” “He likes to put that up for the weekends,” she says.

“He” is the man that Katchadourian has asked to send messages from his office on the 17th floor of 125 Maiden Lane. Since mid-November, at least once a day, he changes the objects to send a new message according to how he’s feeling at the moment. He has no script to follow and Katchadourian never knows which of the twelve possible messages he’ll send next. In keeping with the meaning of the piece, he remains anonymous — the most she’ll offer is he’s a lawyer — but it was important to Katchadourian that he send messages from his real work place, that the objects involved were his personal objects, and the messages were relevant to him. (They chose them together from actual phrases used in semaphore and some invented ones.)

“I’m happy [he] has taken the task up earnestly,” says Katchadourian. “He is changing things on a daily basis and even sometimes more often than that. He has really been using it.” And, with each change of message, over the passage of weeks, a partial portrait of the real person is suggested through glimpses. In the process, the way we look at the most common objects in the work environment has changed as well.

“I hadn’t quite imagined,” she elaborates, “how looking at this one point would activate other views, other windows in the landscape around it. At night when other windows are lit up, you see into them and you start to see things on other people’s windowsills and it suddenly seems that all these things could be codes. Maybe all these people are signaling and we just don’t know about it.”

Katchadourian is known for works in a wide variety of media — from video to photography to sound installation to public art work — that explore implied connections, shifts in the perception of the commonplace, and the outer limits of communication. She’s fascinated by codes, languages, and translation, as seen in pieces like “Pleased, Pleased, Pleased to Meet’cha” (2006), a sound installation where recordings of UN interpreters voicing transliterations of birdcalls were played from speakers in the branches of trees. “Accent Elimination” (2005), a video work, involved learning the accents of her Finland- and Armenian-born parents and the three of them speaking the same text together, and in “Talking Popcorn” (2001), a standard movie theater popcorn machine was rigged with a computerized Morse code translator, which turned the sound of the popcorn popping into words. As with “Office Semaphore,” much of Katchadourian’s work combines an element of the whimsical with a deeper poignancy of isolation, absence, and all that can’t be said lying just beneath the surface.

The Brooklyn-based artist comes to the site once a week to make sure the telescope is still there and working properly. It’s part of her agreement with the Public Art Fund, which commissioned the piece as part of its “In the Public Realm” program. But she would do it anyway to watch how people respond to it and see what the latest message is.



“It’s a little sad,” she reflects when asked about the project coming to an end, her first public art work in Manhattan. “I wish this could be left up for longer than a couple of months... [but] to ask this guy to do it endlessly is really not feasible or fair. I felt two months would be a long enough. On the other hand, it would be really great in some ways if you could sort of go and visit this thing and you would know there would always be something to look at.”

“Office Semaphore” ends Sunday, January 14. After the exhibition, the telescope will be moved to her dealer’s gallery in Chelsea, where it will stay for a while. “I don’t know what we’re going to do with it,” Katchadourian says. “Without someone performing for it, it’s just a telescope.”

But until then, she’ll come by the site some more and look through the eye piece at the lawyer’s office window. “I’m very curious what the last phrase will be,” she says, “Maybe ‘Journey successfully completed.’”

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