



‘Contemporary Art Underground’ Celebrates How MTA Art & Design Builds a Modern Museum for New York City

February 8, 2024

By Kate Mothes



Nancy Blum. Photo by Cathy Carver. All images © the artists, courtesy of Phaidon.

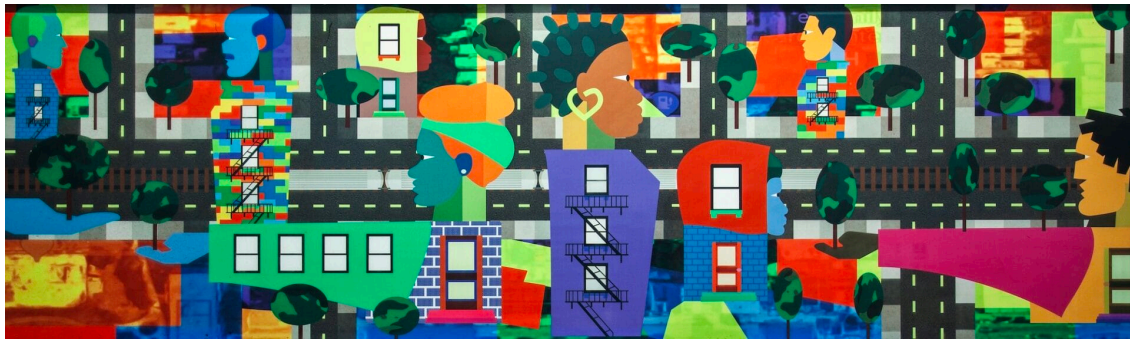
British artist David Hockney famously quipped, “Art has to move you and design does not, unless it’s a good design for a bus.” *Contemporary Art Underground*, a forthcoming book from Monacelli posits that these two facets of visual culture are a match made to move us indeed.

Authored by Sandra Bloodworth, who has directed MTA Art & Design for over 30 years, along with deputy director Cheryl Hageman, the volume showcases more than 100 permanent installations undertaken between 2015 and 2023.

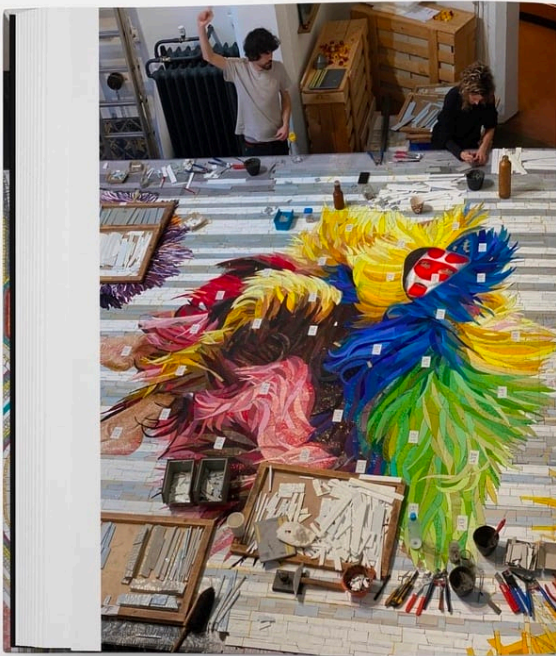
Part catalogue and part field guide, *Contemporary Art Underground* emphasizes the power of visual art in the places we transit through every day. The selection highlights how works by greats like Alex Katz, Derrick Adams, Katherine Bradford, and many more, create a more pleasant and thought-provoking civic experience, transforming the network of subway stations into a highly accessible, one-of-a-kind museum.

Some of the most recent additions to the MTA collection are two mosaics by Yayoi Kusama and Kiki Smith in Manhattan’s brand new Grand Central Madison station. In 2022, Nick Cave completed an immense mosaic and video installation at the Times Sq-42 St. subway titled “Each One, Every One, Equal All,” which features dancing figures evocative of the artist’s *Soundsuits*. And in the busiest entrance of the Grand Central-42 St. station, commuters reflect on a colorful, mirrored glass piece by Jim Hodges titled “I dreamed a world and called it Love,” which spans the width of the hall.

Contemporary Art Underground is slated for release on April 24.



Derrick Adams. Photo by Emil Horowitz



Opposite: Each One during fabrication. Courtesy of Mayer of March.

Above: Bob Cave at Mayer of March studio. Photo: Benny Hart.

Each One is installed directly below the One Times Square building, whose rooftop is home to the famous New Year's Eve ball drop. The mosaic is 14.5 feet high, the tallest of the trio. Broad vertical stripes in gray and silver extend the full height of the wall, connecting with the active plaza above. Soundunits depicted are caught mid-jump, suspended off the ground or rounded into polka dots or ball-like forms. The vertical stripes and lively shapes reinforce a sense of objects rising and falling, as a nod to the popular annual event.

Equal All is the showstopper. The piece is composed of twelve of Cave's Soundunits, shown true-to-size and with a degree of detail that comes closer to the original sculptural works made over a period of twenty years. A wide array of mixed-media materials is depicted including vintage toys, ceramic birds, hot pads, dollsies, bags, hats, bangle beads, wire, twigs, sequined appliques, and tote flowers. The Soundunits

are grounded and neatly contained in the space between knee braces and the ceiling barrel vaults. The concourse wall offers multiple angles for viewing and the opportunity to interact with the work. The effect is approachable and hugely inviting. It's no surprise that this is the location where people linger.

Collaboration—essential to all Arts & Design projects—is particularly important to Each One, Every One, Equal All. While holding closely to a strong personal vision, Cave is a collaborator. At the heart of this process is designer Bob Faust, Cave's partner and design collaborator. Faust works with Cave in whatever way is needed. His guidance is quietly present as he offers an additional or adjacent perspective. He may ask questions, even when he knows the answers, to push a little and give the opportunity for others to go deeper into understanding what Cave is intending.

Faust's influence is most visible in the radiating line motif of Equal All. Many of the original Soundunits captured on this wall are louder than the works made of hair and raffia. They also represent a sizable portion of Cave's practice. To amplify the energies they give off Faust recommended colorful, concentric radiating rings as a means of expressing a shared energy exchange or communication occurring between the Soundunits, suggesting that they are speaking to one another and to passersby. The lines buzz with uncontained excitement. Cave and Faust knew the design had to work for those experiencing it at close range or from 100 feet away. These pieces are the most intricate and reward those who take a close look at the astonishing detail.

The technical success of Each One, Every One, Equal All is directly tied to the quality of the collaboration between artist and fabricator, Mayer of March. In early 2020, Cave and Faust visited Mayer's studio for the first time. Prior to that meeting, it was a leap of faith for Cave to envision his materials of choice, often soft knitted and crocheted fabrics, flowing hair and raffia, or delicate twigs, rendered in hard glass mosaic. Mayer pushed the limits of their own craft to develop innovative ways to convey Cave's mixed media materials in glass. In addition to traditional mosaic techniques, Equal All uses printed glass in the toys and ceramic bits, painted glass in the buttons, etched glass in the dollsies, varying sizes and cuts of glass to suggest everything from hair to sequins, and millefiori beads to add delicate detail that softens the look of the glass tesserae.

Mayer's mosaics capture the essence of Cave's Soundunits, and many feel as if they are being seen in motion. The Soundunits that were photographed as static sculpture stand in contrast with those that capture the flowing color and movement associated with their performance. There is a vivacity that makes it easy to imagine the clang or smooth sound being emitted. This dynamic quality is most pronounced in Every One where the Soundunits appear to be rushing down the concourse, strands of hair and raffia swaying and swirling.

