

Times Square Alliance

INNOVATION

At the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, images of an empty Times Square flooded the media as a marker for how severely public life was changing in New York City. Yet the streets were not, in fact, empty—hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers were still working, and approximately 30,000 people were passing through Times Square alone at the height of the pandemic. Times Square Arts quickly began working with Poster House, PRINT Magazine and For Freedoms to rally artists and designers to create messages for the healthcare and essential workers keeping the city running amidst this crisis. With digital displays across the city's five boroughs and the screens of Times Square as our platform, we aimed to forge a sense of connection during a time when people were asked to stay apart, as well as provide paid opportunities for artists during a time of crisis for many arts organizations across the country.

This project, completed with a very quick turnaround, would not have been possible without the partnership of screen owners in Times Square. With pedestrian counts down in the district, advertising sales for electronic billboards were also down; screen owners in the district donated one minute of screen time every fifteen minutes for the project—typically impossible to donate due to its high value. With the unique opportunity to showcase new artworks on their screens, businesses had the opportunity to help create positive messages and opportunities for artists during this crisis.

OUTCOME

Messages for the City benefited a variety of stakeholder groups: the public and visitors, whose public space experience was enriched by the art; the property owners, who were able to dynamically activate and gain visibility for their billboards after the demand for advertising space had fallen due to decreased pedestrian counts; the New York Immigration Coalition, which received proceeds from the sale of Pedro Reyes' printed edition of his Messages for the City artwork; the artists, who were able to display their art in one of the world's most iconic urban spaces; and the presenting partners, who were able to strengthen bonds of collaboration and increase their impact.

Messages for the City is still active in the Times Square neighborhood as well as throughout New York City. The project's flexibility enables it to remain viable even after property owners retract their donated billboard time, as the program can utilize other spaces. The program has room to grow onto different means of presentation and can remain fresh as new partner organizations and artists are secured. Since these messages first appeared on the screens of Times Square the project has expanded to print artwork on Big Belly receptacles throughout Times Square, not only expanding the number of artists and audience served, but also expanding upon the message of the content being expressed.

Messages for the City received stellar press, with glowing coverage in The New York Times, NPR, Paper Magazine, The Guardian, and more.

EXECUTION

The execution of this project began at the start of the first NYC shut down at which time work began with Poster House, For Freedoms, and PRINT Magazine along with the iconic screens of Times Square. Artists were identified and outreach began. Times Square Arts brokered time individually with various screens in Times Square landing on (for the most part) one minute every fifteen minutes and rotating works during each time interval. Each art work had to be individually designed to match the various specifications of each screen.

There were several rounds of artists who joined as the project continued into the summer months and beyond which allowed the project to reach more people and give more artists the platform. The project was amplified in the press and on social media and with each new round of artists there was new interest.

The project came together quickly with people reaching out in multiple directions to bring the art to the screens. Within one month of planning, the first works started to appear on the screens, and that weekend the project appeared in The New York Times. Planning continued as new artists were added and new amplification strategies were executed.

REPRESENTATION

Messages for the City supported a diverse range of artists in terms of race, gender, age, identity, and experience including many emerging or under-represented artists. By creating a democratized platform for both emerging and established artists, such as Jenny Holzer, Carrie Mae Weems, and Mel Chin, the project opened up new levels of visibility for all. The artists themselves were recommended by the range of presenting collaborators.

To produce Messages, we partnered with For Freedoms, Poster House, and PRINT Magazine, bringing diverse experiences and perspectives to the work: Poster House's curatorial expertise in graphic design and For Freedom's skills in transforming traditional advertising spaces into platforms for socially engaged art. Times Square Arts provided public space management experience and in-district relationships.

Times Square Arts was founded on the belief that making contemporary art accessible outside of the white box museum or commercial gallery setting (which can often be inaccessible) is critical to our city's social and cultural fabric. With nearly one third of museums nationwide closed and the remainder operating at limited capacity, the presentation of public art in public spaces is more important now than ever. The program provided a much-needed opportunity for artists and public access to art.

REPLICATION

Messages for the City is infinitely replicable and has in fact already been replicated in the district in subsequent phases of the program. After presenting art on massive Times Square billboards, the program was expanded to bring art to other on-the-ground displays throughout the district, such as Big Belly receptacles and bus shelter digital displays. The program's flexibility allows it to respond to a variety of contexts. For example, as Messages was brought onto our street level advertising spaces, the content of the art shifted to address the protests for racial equity that were taking place in NYC and across the globe.

Any downtown district that has surfaces for displaying art and access to arts institutions can implement a program akin to Messages. From placing posters in windows to decorating entire storefronts, a tight collaboration between property owners, arts institutions, and the place management organization can help artists send out timely messages to their communities. Indeed, artwork created for our program has since been displayed in cities such as Chicago and Boston through a partnership with JC Decaux which also has screens in NYC and Times Square specifically. Orange Barrel Media brought a selection of works to even more cities.

COMPLEXITY/SIMPLICITY

The unity of purpose with which all partners approached this program made coordination simple. However, actually commissioning art for presentation throughout the district was incredibly complex. Artists typically produce work with specific dimensions; for this project, by contrast, the same piece of digital art needed to fit canvases as different as the skinny vertical American Eagle billboard and the array of striped and cylindrical billboards of the Morgan Stanley building. Times Square Arts was able to utilize our experience with our monthly Midnight Moment program, for which we also have to resize and refocus digital art pieces to fit different billboards, to coordinate between artists and property owners to ensure that the final product was acceptable to all.

With that being said, at its core, it was also a very simple project. With a simple call for artists to send messages of gratitude to those health care and essential workers in Times Square, we found artists and billboard owners eager for the chance to participate. In turn, it made it easy for Times Square Arts to then present artists' projects on the Big Belly receptacles and expand the messages communicated to those of racial justice and the importance of voting.