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A Haven for Art 'Down Under'

Brooklyn's D.U.M.B.O. neighborhood proves it's still the place to go for cutting-edge innovations

By Elizabeth Wade
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Manhattan is fast-paced, densely packed, and difficult to keep up with when you have 200 pages of reading to do before midterms. Staying on top of every niche market and up-and-coming scene is exhausting and impossible, and it is easy to feel out of the loop when impossibly obscure gallery shows and underground concerts dominate our weekend options. At first glance, the DUMBO Art Under the Bridge Festival, presented by the DUMBO Arts Center and running Friday through Sunday, appears to be the usual hipper-than-thou fare. But you'll be surprised what a difference just one subway stop into Brooklyn makes.

DUMBO, the Brooklyn neighborhood Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass, has come and gone as a real estate buzz word and chic nightlife destination, but survived its moment in the spotlight without becoming elitist, pretentious, or—worst of all—passé. It is the best neighborhood to stumble upon on a relaxing Saturday afternoon, with waterfront parks, colorful buildings, and the best view of the Manhattan skyline you will ever hope to see. This Saturday afternoon, all of this will be complemented by glowing outdoor installations, live art projects, galleries filled with both the famous and the unknown, political statements, all-day concerts, and more, all part of the Art Under the Bridge Festival.

Don't despair if every single thing on the schedule is unfamiliar. Extensive cultural knowledge is almost a necessity when navigating Manhattan or Williamsburg, but DUMBO and its art festival are all about exploration and freedom. Immediately after getting off the subway (take the A or the C to High St., then the F to York St.), infinite possibilities will present themselves. Simply walking along the streets is turned into an artistic experience by artists including Michele Gambetta, whose "Rider Project" creates a traveling gallery that invites pedestrians to interact with the artists in the exhibition space, and Oscar Alzate, who is behind the entangling silk-thread "Spider-Webs" in a corridor walkway at Adams and Pearl St.

If you can make it through all these distractions—which are bound to be complimented by the interesting characters in attendance—head west to the waterfront, where both Brooklyn Bridge Park and Empire-Fulton State Ferry Park are filled to the brim with installations. Many of these utilize the beautiful environment around them; "4/4" takes advantage of the river wind to power Daniel Scheffer's self-described "whirly-gigs," and several "Water Art" installations, inspired by everything from whale migrations to botany, float between the shores of Brooklyn and Manhattan. After dark, Project Glow dominates both parks, lighting up the night with Claire Carpenter's hand-made "fireflies," Katherine Keltner's projections onto the river, and a

slightly scary but intriguing project entitled "Beam Up," in which artist Craig Konyk promises to "transport viewers through a shaft of alien light."

While alien light may be unique to one installation, a similar sense of absurdity is felt in much of the festival's live art. To volunteer for Nelson's hair cutting performance, intimidatingly entitled "The Electric Chaircut," simply come to the Washington St. waterfront on Saturday or Sunday from 2-5 p.m. Interact with other festival-goers during two public group photos taken by vydavy sindikat (3 pm Sat. at Washington St., Sun. at Water St.). If audience participation is not your thing, Aimee Burg will be recreating a famous Houdini escape trick several times on Saturday and Sunday on Water St. and Aaron Petersohn will construct mobile emergency shelters using disposable bottles in the parks. While it may be unnecessary in light of recent weather, Great Small Works' Rain Dance should be worth catching as they move through the streets, if only for their "vertical costumes."

In the event that the Rain Dance succeeds, the festival's indoor options include gallery shows and open studios that feature every type of media imaginable from both unknown and established artists. Chuck Close's photorealistic portraits blur the line between detail and collage, and are on display at the 5+5 Gallery (111 Front St. #210) as a part of the gallery's American Masters show. The under-appreciated medium of plastic cameras are the focus next door at Nelson Hancock Gallery (111 Front St. #211), and international art, self-taught artists, and even the artistic response to global warming are all featured in nearby galleries.

Some of the indoor spaces appropriated by the festival are as interesting as the events going on within them. Soundbox (37 Main St), weekend home to Philadelphia "kollage drop-outs" space1026, is a multi-level art warehouse overlooking the East River. While most of the festival is free, a mere \$7 will gain admission to Soundbox's Saturday concert, which culminates with a 1 a.m. performance by members of the hyperactive !!! (appearing under the name Free Blood). Cheap concerts will also take place at a converted loading dock called the Pachyderm House (47 Main St.) and a loft at 20 Jay St.

Over 90 dance companies will perform works at the John Ryan Theater (25 Jay St.) and take advantage of outdoor spaces by performing in Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park. Countless choreographers have made contributions to the festival, so everyone is bound to find something enjoyable. For fewer options but high quality, screenings at video_dumbo (16 Main St.) will focus on conceptual, experimental, and documentary works by New York video artists. \$10 weekend passes are required for these screenings; they will also admit the ticket holder to special programs, including "Field Dreams and Other Rule Based Systems" and "From the Southeast: Conjuring New African Images from Old."

With all these choices and more in just one neighborhood, this weekend begs us to take some long subway rides and explore one of the best artistic events the city has to offer. Wherever the DUMBO Art Under the Bridge Festival takes you this weekend, it is bound to be a unique New York experience.

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