Advertising the Alternative: Technology, Art, and Activism in the Public Art Fund's *Messages to the Public*

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Abstract

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Messages to the Public

Paige Suhl

This thesis examines the Public Art Fund's eight-year long public art project *Messages to the Public* (1982-1990). Located on the since-removed Spectacolor lightboard at One Times Square in Midtown Manhattan, each month *Messages to the Public* integrated the work of a different artist into the lightboard's advertising cycle. Building upon existing scholarship on the project, this thesis emphasises the activism and social issues participating artists responded to in their works, with a particular focus on issues related to public health, housing, and wealth inequality. Drawing from cultural theory and sociology, this thesis examines *Messages to the Public* within its historical and urban context to better understand how public art can become a tool for community outreach and education amidst moments of political and social uncertainty. Moreover, this thesis draws on primary source and archival research to better contextualize the project and the motivations behind it. Through an analysis of the project's lightboard medium, engagement with advertising conventions, boundaries between public and private space, key activist issues, and questions of funding and censorship, this thesis aims to demonstrate how artists used the restrictions and possibilities that the Spectacolor lightboard provided to share text and images that responded to and engaged with some of the decade's defining social issues and crises.

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Introduction

On January 1, 1982, the 800 square foot computer-programmed Spectacolor lightboard at One Times Square added something new to their usual 24/7 cycle of advertisements. For thirty seconds of the lightboard's repeating twenty-minute advertising cycle, the work of street artist Keith Haring was displayed. His signature simplistic figures with bold outlines were brought from their usual subway setting out into the open in Midtown Manhattan. While Haring's work was only shown for one month, he was the first of seventy-eight artists who participated in sharing their work on the Spectacolor lightboard from 1982-1990 in a project called *Messages to the Public*. Funded and overseen by the Public Art Fund (PAF), this project provided artists with a platform to exhibit their work outside of New York City's traditional art institutions. Operating as a collaboration between a privately owned advertising space (the Spectacolor lightboard) and a non-profit organization (the PAF), *Messages to the Public* serves as a poignant example of the intersection between technology, activism, and public art in urban spaces.

In this thesis, I consider how public art can activate highly controlled and commercialised urban spaces into sites for community outreach, activism, and sharing information. By focusing on *Messages to the Public* as my case study, I examine how public art projects can influence and transform the way private spaces, public spaces, and technology are used and engaged with in contemporary cities. Moreover, I question how public art projects such as *Messages to the Public* can encourage political and social reflection by connecting with people outside traditional art institutions during moments of alienation and social isolation.

For my analysis of *Messages to the Public*, I have utilised primary source and archival research. It was vital for my understanding of the project to situate it within its historical context. As a result, I have incorporated newspaper articles published over the course of the project's exhibition period into my analysis to better understand the public reception of the work and the

language used to discuss it. Moreover, consulting the Public Art Fund's archives held at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University was crucial for providing me with a more comprehensive understanding of the project and the development of the individual works. The theoretical approach of my thesis draws from the work of cultural theorists and sociologists such as Neil Postman, Marshall McLuhan, and Georg Simmel. Using these authors' works, I consider *Messages to the Public* in the context of the contemporary urban environment and redevelopment of 1980s New York City. In taking these approaches to my study of *Messages to the Public*, my aim has been to analyze the project through key issues and policies of the time that were influencing the featured works.

To understand *Messages to the Public* and what made it such a distinct project, it is important to situate it within the larger alternative and non-institutional art scene of late twentieth-century New York City. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, New York City saw the expansion of alternative art spaces. These were artist-run centres, pop-up exhibitions, and gallery spaces that did not align with the city's mainstream or major art institutions and museums of the time.[1] The alternative art scene was primarily located in Downtown New York, also known as Lower Manhattan, as many artists and art groups were concentrated in the East Village and SoHo. In the introduction to artist and art historian Julie Ault's book *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, which provides a broad overview of New York City's alternative art scene, she explains the social factors that contributed to the development of so many alternative art spaces in the city:

> These factors included an abundance (some would say an over-abundance) of artists; a culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse urban population in flux; the political context of various civil rights and liberation struggles; the availability of affordable residential and commercial rents; a plethora of neglected or underutilized urban sites–spaces and

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[1] Julie Ault, "For the Record," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, ed. by Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 3-4.

> places in transition; an unrestricted public sphere (as compared to the present); the growth of public funding for culture; and the city's status as a powerful art center.[2]

The social and political context of late-twentieth century New York City made it a prime location and moment for creative exploration and collaboration.[3]

Even though many of the most prominent alternative art spaces and exhibitions of the 1980s were more DIY and artist led, there were significant art organizations supporting the new downtown art scene either by funding artist projects, making connections between artists and exhibition spaces, or advocating for municipal and federal support for the arts. Among those organizations was the PAF, a non-profit founded by Doris Freedman in 1977 that develops public art projects in New York City, a mission it continues to carry out today.[4] Prior to founding the PAF, Freedman was already heavily involved in the development of New York City's public art projects and initiatives, having worked for the city's department of Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Affairs and having founded the Public Arts Council where she worked to develop public art projects that were community specific and accessible.[5] Freedman passed away in 1981 and her daughter Susan Freedman has been the president of the PAF since 1986.

Messages to the Public was one of the PAF's defining projects and a key example of artists using their work to engage with local issues that speak directly to the city's population outside of an art institution context. The 1980s were a decade of social uncertainty in New York City as rising poverty, addiction, and homelessness, and the AIDS crisis impacted a significant

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[2] Ault, "For the Record," 6.
[3] It was within this context that many artist-run groups and art organizations developed such as Collaborative Projects, Inc. (Colab), Group Material, and Creative Time.
[4] Julie Ault, "A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-85," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, ed. by Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 6.
[5] Michele C. Bogart, "The Patronage Frame: New York City's Mayors and the Support of Public Art," in *A Companion to Public Art Frames*, ed. by Cher Krause Knight and Harriet Senie (Chichester: Wiley, 2016), 390, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1002/9781118475331.ch18.

portion of the city's population.[6] *Messages to the Public* is notable for the ways in which artists used the project to bring attention to these issues, among others, amplifying concerns that were being systematically overlooked by both the federal and municipal governments. It was also the first time the PAF used a privately owned space to exhibit one of their public art projects.[7] The Spectacolor lightboard was installed at One Times Square in 1977 and prior to *Messages to the Public* had been primarily used for commercial advertisements. Art historian Annie Dell'Aria notes the board was novel for its computer programmable designs and vibrant lights that made it visible even during the day.[8] In 1980, Spectacolor programmer, and former Colab member, Jane Dickson, requested that Colab's *Times Square Show* be advertised on the lightboard.[9] According to an article published in the *Times Daily* in 1983, Dickson's idea to advertise an exhibition on the board aligned with Spectacolor president George Stonbely's own interest in art and desire to incorporate images other than advertisements into the board's cycle.[10] It was from here that Dickson developed *Messages to the Public* and the PAF became involved.[11]

However, using new technologies as artistic mediums to reach wider audiences was not a completely new idea. Prior to the 1980s, Colab and its contributing artists had been experimenting with technology and mass media through projects like *All Color News*, a cable television show that focused on local and community-centered issues by capturing videos of the city to critique traditional news.[12] As curator David E. Little notes, Colab "members were deeply

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[6] Martha Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," in *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, ed. by Brian Wallis (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 24-25.
[7] Elizabeth Bibb, "Millions See Art in Lights Over Broadway," *Times Daily*, Sept. 3, 1983.
[8] Annie Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks: Intra-spectacular Public Art," in *The Moving Image as Public Art* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 71, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1007/978-3-030-65904-2_3.
[9] Michael Brenson, "Art People; Art Lights Up Times Sq." *The New York Times*, June 25, 1982.
[10] Bibb, "Millions See Art in Lights Over Broadway."
[11] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 72.
[12] David E. Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back: Collectivity and New York Alternative Spaces," *Art Journal* 66, no. 1 (2007): 70-73, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068517.

committed to the investigation of communications systems and to the potential of new technology to encourage collectivity and engage broader publics."[13] This thesis examines and contextualises how the Spectacolor lightboard can be seen as part of a broader trend of Downtown artists and alternative artist groups engaging with mass media to connect with wider audiences.

While the PAF officially sponsored the project, as a non-profit organization it also received external funding from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Inter-Arts-Program.[14] Participating artists were selected by a rotating committee of professionals from the New York art world who would each propose a selection of artists for the project, then decide as a group who would be invited to participate that year.[15] An article published in 1982 in *The New York Times* lists the initial selection panel as including writer and critic Lucy Lippard, artist Janet Henry, and PAF employees Jessica Cusick and Jenny Dixon, among others.[16] The artist's "messages" would last from twenty to thirty seconds and would be incorporated into the usual advertisement cycle of the Spectacolor board. The board itself was on twenty-four hours a day and the artist messages were repeated fifty times a day, only running from 8:00am to 11:00pm.[17]

While the intention of the project was to incorporate art into the commercial lightboard, the works presented were far from purely aesthetic. The technological capacities of the board limited the colours and shapes artists could work with, forcing designs to be simplified or reduced.[18] Because of these limitations, many artists took advantage of the advertising technology to display facts, statistics, and statements related to pressing social and political

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[13] Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back," 73.
[14] Anna Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator: A Critical Study of the Spectacolor Lightboard Series 'Messages to the Public,'" Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1993, 2.
[15] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 68-69.
[16] Brenson, "Art People; Art Lights Up Times Sq."
[17] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 2.
[18] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 2-3.

issues impacting the residents of New York City. Some of the most frequently referenced topics explored throughout the seventy-eight projects were issues related to housing and homelessness, environmental concerns, anti-war sentiments, the influence of mass media on society, and the AIDS crisis. Through *Messages to the Public*, Times Square became an outdoor exhibition space and a platform for political expression.

Despite lasting for eight years and displaying the work of some of the decade's defining artists, and some of most iconic artists of American contemporary art, *Messages to the Public* remains a fairly underexamined project. The most significant research conducted on the project is art historian Anna Novakov's 1993 Ph.D. dissertation "The Artist as Social Commentator: A Critical Study of the Spectacolor Lightboard Series 'Messages to the Public.'" In her dissertation, Novakov argues that through the project, "participating artists […] not only become a type of social commentator, but also a kind of agent provocateur whose work is a call to action."[19] Throughout her dissertation, Novakov traces the history of text and activism in American public art projects and the connection the project creates between participating artists and the Times Square audience. Her dissertation is also notable for the interviews she completed and transcribed with some of the projects participating artists. Novakov's dissertation is extremely thorough and an important analysis of the project; she focuses primarily on the relationship between the artist and their public, between the project and the broader New York City art world, the significance of text in art, and the project as conceptual art. Her conclusion does present further points of consideration for future examinations of the project such as its relation to advertising and the ways activist groups have engaged with similar mediums and

[19] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 11.

styles, which are both aspects of the project that stood out to me when I first encountered it and ideas I build upon in my thesis.[20]

While my thesis draws significantly from Novakov's work, I examine the relationship between the project, technology, public space, and activism further. Central to the project were the social and political circumstances artists were responding to and representing in their works, an aspect of the project that I believe requires further attention. My analysis of *Messages to the Public* aims to bring a stronger focus to how artists were using the Spectacolor lightboard as a platform to raise awareness about issues related to public health and safety, such as the AIDS crisis, wealth inequality, and housing insecurity, that were being overlooked on a national scale and profoundly impacting the city and its people.

Furthermore, in the decades since Novakov's dissertation was written, the idea of computer-based technologies functioning as artistic mediums and the role of technology in the art world and in public art projects has completely transformed. Finding artworks on screens in public spaces is no longer a novelty, but a common occurrence, especially in major cities. A more recent examination of *Messages to the Public* and public art in Times Square can be found in art historian Annie Dell'Aria's chapter "Commercial Breaks: Intra-spectacular Public Art," in which she examines the evolution of screen-based art in Times Square. Dell'Aria argues that screen-based public art projects provide viewers with unique and distinct experiences from those of viewing advertisements, which she refers to as "an intra-spectacular mode of address."[21] Dell'Aria presents *Messages to the Public* as an early example of screen-based art in Times Square.[22] Her examination of the relationship between *Messages to the Public* and its advertising

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[20] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 119-120.
[21] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 67.
[22] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 71.

and urban context thus provide me with significant background into Times Square as both an advertising and exhibition space, and the interaction between art and advertising. My contribution to the existing literature on this project is therefore to better contextualise and understand the social and political policies that were directly inspiring many of the participating artists' works and to situate this project within the wider social issues impacting the city over the project's almost decade long run.

In Section 1, I examine Times Square as a space for public engagement and the development of technology and mass media in urban centers. I begin by presenting the historical context in which *Messages to the Public* was operating and the different social and political circumstances that were influencing the New York City art world. I then examine how *Messages to the Public* exists within a broader context of public artworks occupying advertising spaces and how the project's computer-programmable lightboard medium impacts its reception.

In Section 2, I examine how *Messages to the Public* aligns with arguments that public art can contribute to feelings of community and solidarity. I begin by providing a brief background on the development of public art post-World War II, before examining ideas related to urban isolation and alienation as they relate to public and private space within the timeframe of the project.

In Section 3, I examine key social and political issues that artists were responding to in their messages. I focus primarily on works that displayed concrete statistics and statements related to public health and access to housing using Jeffrey Pittu, Martha Rosler, and Lynne Tillman's works as my primary examples. Through my analysis of these works I consider the educational and informational capabilities of the board.

Finally, in Section 4, I examine the ways in which public and private funding can influence public art projects. Focusing on the American culture wars of the late 1980s, I examine how shifting national perspectives on federal support for the arts were impacting alternative art spaces and projects. I then consider how censorship and private ownership influenced *Messages to the Public*.

Using Novakov's dissertation and Dell'Aria's chapter as key reference points in my examination of *Messages to the Public*, I build upon these authors' works and use this project as a case study in how public art projects can engage with technology to become sources for sharing pertinent information amidst moments of political and social uncertainty. Many of the key issues participating artists were engaging with such as wealth inequality, housing insecurity, and access to healthcare continue to impact people in New York City today. The continuation of these issues reaffirms the relevancy of studying projects like *Messages to the Public* in our contemporary moment as we continue to reflect on how public art can positively contribute to the urban environment and challenge the type of information we consume in our daily lives.

Section 1: Technology, Mass Media, and Reshaping the Urban Environment

Urban Redevelopment and the 1975 Fiscal Crisis

In 1975, New York City experienced a major fiscal crisis, an event that would influence the city's economic and social policies for decades to come. As historian Sarah Miller-Davenport explains, the 1960s and 1970s saw a huge economic movement away from New York City with many industries, business headquarters, and middle-class families moving out of the city, resulting in a significant population decline. The municipal government began taking out more loans, but by 1975 the city had been cut-off by banks due to uncertainty that they would be able to honour repayment plans. With the city needing a new influx of capital, there was an increasing push among city officials to bring corporate entities and wealthier people to the larger metropolitan area.[23]

Miller-Davenport highlights one of the steps in attracting new investments and people to the city following the fiscal crisis was a push by many private and public organizations to financially support New York City's arts. There was an understanding that to revitalise the city, the finance sector needed to expand. However, to attract people from the finance sector, the arts and culture sector of the city had to be well developed. Despite the increased funding and promotion, this had a negative impact on the public perception of arts within the city as Miller-Davenport notes, "the arts themselves became a luxury commodity, out of reach for most New Yorkers."[24]

The disconnect between the city's working-class populations and the arts can be seen in what types of art projects and programs were being supported following the fiscal crisis. The

[23] Sarah Miller-Davenport, "The Cultural Center of the World: Art, Finance, and Globalization in Late Twentieth-Century New York," *Journal of Urban History* 50, no. 1 (2024): 126-127, https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442211064856.
[24] Miller-Davenport, "The Cultural Center of the World,"123-126.

Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) was established in response to the fiscal crisis, bringing together people from the private and public sector to produce a balanced budget that would renew trust in the city and its expenses.[25] Certain set restrictions prevented the city from completely cutting its budget across the board which meant some parts of the city's budget received disproportionately larger funding cuts than others.[26] Notably, Miller-Davenport explains that while healthcare and education budgets were being cut, established art institutions maintained significant funding whereas the funding for more local and community based arts outreach programs were cut alongside arts education in public schools which "was all but eliminated after 1975."[27]

In 1981, Ronald Reagan, a Republican, was elected President of the United States and the New York City fiscal crisis and the city's economic instability became an opportunity to boost more conservative social and economic policies in the city.[28] As sociologist Miriam Greenberg explains, the fiscal crisis was associated with the city's previous liberal Democratic government and its increased funding of social services, concessions to unions, and higher taxes, positioning neoliberalism and the new Republican federal government as the answer to the crisis.[29] The increasing financial and real estate investment in the city did prove successful in bringing in the middle-class white-collar workers city officials desired following the fiscal crisis.[30] However, the city's urban redevelopment came at the expense of the people already living there, creating

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[25] Nicholas Freudenberg, Marianne Fahs, Sandro Galea, and Andrew Greenberg, "The Impact of New York City's 1975 Fiscal Crisis on the Tuberculosis, HIV, and Homicide Syndemic," *American Journal of Public Health* 96, no. 3 (2006): 424-425, https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2005.063511.
[26] Freudenberg, "The Impact of New York City's 1975 Fiscal Crisis," 425.
[27] Miller-Davenport, "The Cultural Center of the World," 127.
[28] Miriam Greenberg, "New York City as a Symbol of Neoliberalism," in *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 230-232.
[29] Greenberg, "New York City as a Symbol of Neoliberalism," 230-231.
[30] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 25.

significant wealth inequality within the city.[31] With Reagan's presidency came federal budget cuts and the introduction of social policies centered around less government intervention. Many of these new policies specifically targeted low-income housing initiatives and funding for public health services which significantly impacted a large portion of New York City's residents.[32]

While New York City was experiencing economic turmoil, changing social policies, and expanding health and homelessness crises, the city's art scene was undergoing its own transformation both in connection and in response to the city's changing environment. The New York City art world of the 1960s and early 1970s was significantly marked by SoHo's redevelopment as a key art center, however, by the late 1970s the area's gentrification had made the neighbourhood too expensive for many artists.[33] These changes were also impacting how artists viewed the arts. As Little explains by the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, alternative art spaces in New York City were gaining a reputation for being too controlled, causing artists to seek more artist-run groups.[34]

Additionally, as a part of the city's broader redevelopment plans came the redevelopment of Times Square. Scholar Frank Roost explains how post-World War II, Times Square was notoriously known as an area with a large concentration of unhoused people, drug dealers, and sex workers. In 1981, New York City and the New York State Urban Development Corporation aimed to change Times Square's reputation by encouraging the development of offices, hotels, and commercial spaces in the area.[35] Yet, Times Square's redevelopment was just one part of a

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[31] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 25-27.
[32] Freudenberg, "The Impact of New York City's 1975 Fiscal Crisis," 426.
[33] Stephen Petrus, "From Gritty to Chic: The Transformation of New York City's SoHo, 1962-1976," *New York History* 84, no. 1 (2003): 80, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23183476.
[34] Little, "Colab Takes a Piece, History Takes It Back," 63-64.
[35] Frank Roost, "Recreating the City as Entertainment Center: The Media Industry's Role in Transforming Potsdamer Platz and Times Square," *Journal of Urban Technology* 5, no. 3 (1998): 11-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/10630739883804.

broader campaign to attract investors to the city that was centered around emphasizing the city's opportunities for business, consumption, and tourism.[36] The years in which *Messages to the Public* was being exhibited therefore align with a time of key urban and economic redevelopment and reshaping not just for the Times Square area, but New York City as a whole.

Advertising, Mass Media, and Art

Along with Times Square's rising gentrification and urban redevelopment came the implementation of more screens in the area, which Dell'Aria argues contributes to the "transformation of the street into a site of spectatorship."[37] The new computer-programmable billboards of the 1980s were not the first instances of lighting, signage, advertising, and electricity coming together in an urban center. Media and communications scholar Scott McQuire describes this implementation of electric lighting into urban architecture as "electrification." He particularly emphasises how the increasing "electrification" of cities transformed the role of architecture and how people interact with it.[38] As McQuire explains, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, "illuminated signage soon became one of the most distinctive attributes of a modern city." Through the rise of electric lighting and signs throughout urban centers, advertising began to dominate and reshape the urban environment.[39] As Roost argues, contemporary urban public spaces are shaped and influenced by ideas of consumerism, turning them into "simulations of a city, following the design principles developed for the arrangement of theme parks, where space is organized to promote and facilitate

[36] Greenberg, "New York City as a Symbol of Neoliberalism," 234.
[37] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 68-70.
[38] Scott McQuire, *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2008), 113.
[39] McQuire, *The Media City*, 120.

continuous consumption."[40] The presence of billboards and lightboards in Times Square like the Spectacolor one can be understood in relation to a broader history of urban redevelopment and gentrification that centers consumerism.

With urban centers becoming increasingly commodified and privatised in the 1980s, it is important to consider how these spaces were being utilized by artists and what types of information people were engaging with in public areas. As art historian Tara Burk remarks: "Before the ubiquity of the Internet, building exteriors were vital public forums for the exchange of information, particularly in cities like New York where pedestrian culture enabled unique public exhibition opportunities."[41] In her 1989 analysis of temporary public artworks recently exhibited in New York City, Patricia Phillips reflects on the effect *Messages to the Public* has in the context of traditional advertisements: "Inserted between tacky and aggressive advertisements, these Public Art Fund 'moments' not only provide a surprising, direct forum for public art but also raise questions about the relationship of public art to information and stimulate wry speculations about art and advertising."[42] Art historian Claire Grace presents a similar claim in her analysis of the art collective Group Material's 1983 subway art project *Subculture* as she notes: "Even as *Subculture* diverged from publicity's conventional role of propagating specific and explicit messages, it proposed something more complex than a bare antithesis of standard publicity."[43] The architecture and environment of New York City inherently leant itself to this type of spontaneous artistic engagement. Public artworks intervened and disrupted advertising,

[40] Roost, "Recreating the City as Entertainment Center," 1.
[41] Tara Burk, "Radical Distribution: AIDS Cultural Activism in New York City, 1986-1992," *Space and Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 439, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1177 /1206331215616095.
[42] Patricia C. Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art," *Art Journal* 48, no. 4 (1989): 334, https://doi.org/10.2307/777018.
[43] Claire Grace, "Counterpublics in Transit: 'Dangerous' Painting in *Subculture*, 1983," in *Art Demonstration: Group Material and the 1980s* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2022), 194.

offering viewers the opportunity to critically engage with not only text and images, but contemporary society, an experience that traditional advertisements do not allow for.

Turning to *Messages to the Public*, the alternative ways of engaging with advertising and commercial spaces that public art facilitates can be observed in American artist Jenny Holzer's work for the project which ran from March 1, 1982, to March 31, 1982. Holzer, who is best known for her text-based works both on posters and screens, uses the advertising medium to share what she refers to as "Truisms." In her analysis of Holzer's work for the project, Dell'Aria draws attention to the "deliberate and subversive confusion" Holzer creates through her rapidly changing statements of varying tones. [44] This is especially notable in a video taken of Holzer's work during the project, made accessible on the SFMOMA website. In the video, the Spectacolor board displays an advertisement for *Cheetos*. However just as soon as the advertisement appears it disappears and is replaced with text reading: "ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE" (fig. 1).[45] With no immediate indication of what this is or who has created it, Holzer's work creates a stark contrast to the clear products and slogans present in all other content on the lightboard. Holzer's name only appears once the screen has cycled through a selection of her "Truisms."[46]

The seamless way in which the works were integrated into the advertising cycle with no prior announcement or clear demarcation is a key aspect of *Messages to the Public.* It provokes further consideration of how artists were using the Spectacolor advertising space and the rapid change of information, characteristic of electronic advertising boards, to share messages and ideas that stand out from a brand name or logo. Moreover, the unfamiliar graphics presented on a

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[44] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 75.
[45] *Jenny Holzer's public "clichés,"* (1982; SFMOMA, 2015), video, https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/jenny-holzers-public-cliches/.
[46] *Jenny Holzer's public "clichés."*

medium in which viewers would not expect to find complete artworks or personal statements challenges viewers' perception of what belongs on a major advertising board in the center of Manhattan and whose messages can be platformed alongside major businesses in an area intended to sell the touristic fantasy of New York City.

While *Messages to the Public* represents one example of artists using an advertising space and medium to share their work, it was not the only project of its kind. This type of intervention is equally prevalent in other public art projects such as Group Material's 1983 project *Subculture* in which one hundred artists created artworks to replace the empty advertising spaces found in New York City's subway cars. Grace notes the motivation behind the project was for subway riders to have a more profound engagement with advertising space than they normally do. Moreover, similar to the motivations behind *Messages to the Public*, Grace describes the growing desire and belief among Group Material that "infiltrating conduits of mass advertising would radically expand art's public."[47] *Subculture* demonstrates how the desire to occupy and utilize consumer advertising space was not exclusive to *Messages to the Public*, but was a part of a broader desire among New York City artists to use advertising conventions and spaces to reach wider audiences in unconventional ways.

It is also worth noting that *Messages to the Public* was not the only public art project to use a Spectacolor lightboard. Spectacolor lightboards gained international reach and were located in several major cities globally. It is thus not surprising that a similar project was carried out by the London-based non-profit public art organization Artangel. Researcher Maeve Connolly includes this project in her article examining key mass media based public art projects organized by Artangel (then known as Artangel Trust) from 1985-1991 when the organization was under

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[47] Grace, "Counterpublics in Transit," 175, 184, & 218.

the control of its founders Roger Took and John Carson.[48] Artangel Trust's Spectacolor project ran from 1988-1991 and displayed the work of eight artists on the Spectacolor lightboard at Piccadilly Circus in London, the city's Times Square equivalent. Of the eight participating artists, two also participated in *Messages to the Public*: John Fekner and Jenny Holzer. Following a similar method of display as the PAF had, Connolly explains the artworks "were wholly integrated into the advertising cycle" and artists engaged in similar ways with their commercial environment. Artangel Trust's project did not operate in isolation from the PAF's as Connolly notes that her research revealed letters between Carson and the PAF's James Clark discussing their Spectacolor projects. Connolly explains that the artworks created for the Picadilly Circus Spectacolor board "were symbolically inserted into a larger cultural economy, organized around linkages between London and 'global' cities such as New York and Tokyo, and equally spectacularized urban spaces such as Times Square and Shibuya."[49] In the context of Artangel Trust's very similar project, *Messages to the Public*'s usage of the Spectacolor lightboard and its location in Times Square situates it within a larger global conversation about art, advertising, and the redevelopment of urban centres. Additionally, the fact that the two Spectacolor projects were occurring simultaneously demonstrates there was a wide-reaching desire among artists and urban residents to engage with media that pushed back against the consumer centered cities of the late twentieth century.

The Relationship Between Technology, Art, and Accessibility

[48] Maeve Connolly, "Artangel and the Changing Mediascape of Public Art," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 198, doi: 10.1386/jcs.2.2.196_1.
[49] Connolly, "Artangel and the Changing Mediascape of Public Art," 204-209.

While projects such as *Subculture* may have thematic similarities with *Messages to the Public*, what differentiates these works from each other are their mediums. *Subculture* presented static images alongside the many other static advertisements found in the subway. In contrast, *Messages to the Public* utilized the rapid pace and bright flashing lights of modern electronic advertising characteristic of the Times Square environment, placing unexpected, and in many cases, explicitly political images and statements in between familiar and easily consumable advertisements. As Dell'Aria notes: "Urban screen content is made to be both constantly on and ever-changing, pulling tiny snippets of attention in multiple (even simultaneous) directions rather than riveting the viewer to a chair." Dell'Aria goes on to explain how digital advertisements have different goals than art, as screens encourage rapid and constant stimulation as opposed to the more meditative and reflective experiences that art traditionally encourages.[50]

In his text "The Medium is the Message," philosopher Marshall McLuhan explains, "[electric light] is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name." By his interpretation, the actual medium of the lightboard is language or literature as opposed to the board itself. He elaborates, stating that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs."[51] Works like *Subculture*, Artangel Trust's Spectacolor project, and *Messages to the Public* exemplify how mass media based public art projects, no matter their medium, can subvert advertising spaces through more political and activist language that challenges viewers' expectations of commercial and traditionally apolitical spaces.

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[50] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 66.
[51] Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), 8.

However, screen-based technologies and the rapid access to information they provide have transformed how we interpret information. The ways in which screens impact our viewing experiences and reception of information is thoroughly examined by cultural theorist Neil Postman in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Postman's book presents a reflection on and critique of television and the ways it has transformed how information is perceived and received. Key to his argument is his examination of how television has influenced the way people interact with and absorb information. Postman notes how the development of new electronic technologies at the turn of the twentieth century has "called into being a new world–a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again."[52] While Postman's critique of our "peek-a-boo world" focuses on television and the influence of screens in the domestic environment, the rapid consumption of ever-changing information was equally present in public life through the rise of electronic billboards.[53] As researcher Dave Colangelo explains, the way people engage and interact with urban environments is transformed through the presence of screens, forming "a space defined less by pre-existing relationships of familiarity and solidity and more by temporary, ephemeral connections and impressions."[54] There is an inherent difference to the way information is shared, gathered, and engaged with in both public and private life because of the rapid access to information that screens enable.

While Postman critiques the way television and screens have influenced how we receive information, these changes are not all negative, as *Messages to the Public* also serves as an

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[52] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 77.
[53] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 78.
[54] Dave Colangelo, "Curating Massive Media," in *The Building as Screen: A History, Theory, and Practice of Massive Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 133.

example of how artists and art groups were using public art to transform urban spaces into accessible and liberated extensions of the museum and gallery space. Novakov explains that "by utilizing an advertising medium, artists were given access to a much broader and larger audience than they would have had within a more traditional art medium."[55] McQuire expresses a similar sentiment about media art as he notes:

> A crucial role for new media art in public space is the potential to avoid the filter of sites such as the art gallery, and thereby engage audiences who might never cross that threshold. This indicates the new function of art in the contemporary media city: not as the belated response to an already existing social world, but as an integral part of the construction of social relationships.[56]

By bringing art directly to the public through advertising technologies, artists were engaging with their audiences in a context detached from the New York City art world that had been significantly impacted by the 1975 fiscal crisis. Furthermore, the idea that art can construct "social relationships" is significant, considering how theorists such as Postman and Phillips saw technology and screens in the domestic environment as promoting "triviality" or "isolation," respectively.[57] In her essay "Out of Order: The Public Art Machine," Phillips explains how technology has changed the way we engage with spaces and information: "The public world comes into each home as it never has before […] so that the rituals that were once shared conspicuously in a group are now still shared–but in isolation."[58] The presence of *Messages to the Public* on a public lightboard typically used for impersonal advertising enacts a new communal experience of engaging with information and electronic media at a moment in which technology and urban development were facilitating alienation and disconnection.

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[55] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 37.
[56] McQuire, *The Media City*, 149.
[57] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 80.; Patricia Phillips, "Out of Order: The Public Art Machine," in *The City Cultures Reader*, ed. by Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden (Routledge, 2000), 195.
[58] Phillips, "Out of Order," 195.

Messages to the Public not only made art and activist messages accessible to a wider public but also made new technologies accessible to artists. The development of new video technologies meant artists had more access to previously inaccessible tools and media and gave artists new approaches for engaging with the public, especially in public art displays.[59] As stated in a description of the project for the exhibition *Computers and Art*, curated by Cynthia Goodman for the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York in the fall of 1987: "The purpose [of *Messages to the Public*] was to offer a fresh approach to the computer art field by introducing computer visualization techniques to artists with no previous experience. Frequently inaccessible computer technology was made available to creative artists for the benefit of a mass audience."[60] In the exhibition's accompanying book, Goodman states that "computers are making unprecedented aesthetic experiences possible and revolutionizing the way art is conceived, created, and perceived." New technologies were becoming accessible for artists to work with, for non-artists to experiment with, and, as Goodman notes, new technologies like personal computers and televisions were making art accessible for viewers to see in their own homes.[61]

With new technologies becoming more accessible for artists to experiment with, televisions and screens also began to have a more pronounced presence in museums and galleries, creating new relationships between artists, viewers, and exhibition spaces.[62] As artist and art historian Margot Lovejoy states: "Proliferation of electronic technologies has increased

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[59] Lucy R. Lippard, "Too Political? Forget It," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. by Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 54-55.
[60] Cynthia Goodman, *Digital Visions: Computers and Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc, 1987), 151. The exhibition was wide-ranging and presented works "painted" on computers, artists experimenting with photography and video, and works using electronic and computerized lighting and signage. Among those works included in the exhibition was *Messages to the Public*, although not the physical work itself.
[61] Goodman, *Digital Visions: Computers and Art*, 10-12.
[62] Margot Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents: Art and Artists in the Age of Electronic* (Upper Saddle River: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 96-99.

cultural participation of the public in art events (as a form of empowerment and education)."[63] The imagery and text artists displayed on the Spectacolor lightboard through *Messages to the Public*, especially those works that shared concrete statistics and statements, exemplifies how new technologies can increase the educational and informational potential of public artworks by making these works, and consequently the messages and ideas they shared, more accessible for viewers.

Furthermore, Dell'Aria claims that screen-based public art provides viewers with "moments of enchantment" which she refers to as "an intra-spectacular mode of address."[64] Dell'Aria emphasises the ability of *Messages to the Public* and other public art projects on the screens of Times Square to create new ways for viewers to experience the urban environment.[65] However, the images and information shared by artists during the project were not necessarily "enchanting," and I argue can be analysed as unsettling and uncomfortable disruptions that brought the reality of living in 1980s New York City to an area that was undergoing commercialisation and gentrification. Artists were not only providing moments of relief or distraction from advertisements but prompting the Times Square audience to engage with complex political and social issues that were directly linked to the city's redevelopment.

The significance of artists engaging with public commercial screens is equally examined by Colangelo who explains that these screens will always be associated with commodities and consumption, but they can take on new meanings as a way "to critique or co-opt commercialisation, or to re-envision the role of urban media environments in shaping collective identity, historical consciousness, and public display culture."[66] The late twentieth century

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[63] Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents*, 86.
[64] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 67.
[65] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 94.
[66] Colangelo, "Curating Massive Media," 166-167.

already saw a growing number of artists using the spaces and collections of the museums and galleries in which they were exhibiting to critique these very institutions. In her analysis of the relationship between artists and museums in late twentieth century New York City, curator and art critic Lucy R. Lippard highlights the work of artists Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson as representing "the postmodernist 'cultural politics' of the later 1980s and 1990s, with its focus on internal dissent and individual practice."[67] However, the presence of projects like *Messages to the Public* in public spaces and the exclusivity of only being able to experience them wholly in a specific shared public space is what distinguishes the viewing experience of public art from that of a gallery or museum space. Through public art, viewers who may not have previously encountered art are exposed to new ways of engaging with contemporary culture and in the case of *Messages to the Public*, new ways of engaging with and confronting the city's changing social and political environment.

[67] Lucy R. Lippard, "Biting the Hand: Artists and Museums in New York since 1969," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, ed. by Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 79-80.; Key artworks that exemplify museum intervention by Andrea Fraser and Fred Wilson are Fraser's performance art piece *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* performed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1989 and Wilson's exhibition *Mining the Museum* shown at the Maryland Historical Society Museum in 1992.

Section 2: The Relationship Between Public Art and Space

Public Art in the Late Twentieth Century

One of the key aspects of *Messages to the Public* was the way participating artists used the project as a tool for activism, highlighting the various social and political issues impacting New York City at the time. Even the name of the project, *Messages to the Public*, reaffirms that the works exhibited were not designed nor conceptualized as aesthetic objects detached from their locations, but as true engagements with the people of New York City and contemporary experiences of public life. However, public art as a means of sharing activist and political messaging was not always common and its site-specificity and community focus was still a new and developing concept for public artworks in the 1980s.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of a public artwork was vastly different from that of the 1980s. As curator and art historian Miwon Kwon notes, many of the public artworks of the 1960s and 1970s were large "modernist abstract sculptures" and were "usually signature pieces by internationally established male artists." While these works were publicly accessible, Kwon explains, the actual sites of these works were of little relevance to them, as they could have been placed anywhere in the city and had the same effect. As a result of these disconnected works, Kwon explains "critics and artists argued that autonomous signature-style artworks sited in public places functioned more like extensions of the museum or gallery, advertising individual artists and their accomplishments (and by extension their patrons' status) rather than truly engaging the public."[68]

Kwon notes how public art in New York City was failing to resonate with its viewing public: "Instead of being a welcome reprieve in the flow of everyday urban life, public art

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[68] Miwon Kwon, "Sitings of Public Art: Integration versus Intervention," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, ed. by Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 284-286.

seemed to be an unwanted imposition completely disengaged from it."[69] There had to be a reconsideration of the relationship between public art and its viewers. It was not until the mid 1970s that federal and municipal organizations began making a concerted effort to fund site-specific public art projects.[70] Art historian Rosalyn Deutsche argues "the newly acknowledged reciprocity between artwork and site changed the identity of each," allowing public art to now engage meaningfully and consciously with the issues and politics of its locations.[71] The growing interest of the 1980s in public artworks that engaged with their locations was developing alongside an expanding activism among artists, especially as artists became more aware of how they would be impacted by the Reagan government's policies.[72]

The increased importance placed on site-specificity and the growing involvement many artists had in activist movements led to the development of "new genre public art." While cultural theorist Malcolm Miles dates the beginnings of new genre public art to the 1990s, the ideas and motivations behind these types of public artworks are equally present in *Messages to the Public*. Miles defines new genre public art, stating:

> The value of new genre public art is, then, in its ability to initiate a continuing process of social criticism, and to engage defined publics on issues […] whilst its purpose is not to fill museums […] but to resist the structures of power and money which have caused abjection, and in so doing create imaginative spaces in which to construct, or enable others to construct diverse possible futures. New genre public art is process-based, frequently ephemeral, often related to local rather than global narratives, and politicised. It represents the most articulate form of a wider disenchantment with the artworld conventions still embodied by most public art during the 1980s.[73]

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[69] Kwon, "Sitings of Public Art," 286-287.
[70] Kwon, "Sitings of Public Art," 283.
[71] Rosalyn Deutsche, "Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City," in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 61.
[72] Lucy R. Lippard, "Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. by Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 353.
[73] Malcolm Miles, "Art as a Social Process," in *Art, Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* (London: Routledge, 1997), 164.

New genre public art was strongly rooted in ideas of community and connection as artists engaged and responded to specific spaces, problems, and people's lived experiences, as opposed to appealing to a general public, which are all characteristics of the works produced as a part of *Messages to the Public*.

Turning to *Messages to the Public*, Novakov notes that the location of the Spectacolor board influenced the participating artist's projects.[74] This is apparent when evaluating the works of *Messages to the Public*, as many artists either shared messages and statistics directly related to key social and political issues impacting New York City in the 1980s or used their platform to comment indirectly on the commercial and urban environment of Times Square. As Grace notes in her analysis of *Subculture*, its location within the subway was essential to its interpretation and appreciation, as the works featured in the project "could not be properly owned or collected."[75] The inability to own a public art project is significant for *Messages to the Public*, especially because the artworks produced for the project do not exist in a physical form since they were all computer programmed and are today only viewable through photographs. Thus, in considering the definition of new genre public art provided by Miles and the growing importance of site-specificity for public art projects of the 1980s, *Messages to the Public* serves as a key example of a public artwork that engages with specific issues and ideas and can only be truly experienced as originally intended: in person, in its specific location, and at the right time.

Interactions with Public Space

However, even with these changes in public art, the public spaces in which these works were being exhibited remained complex and not necessarily always publicly accessible despite being

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[74] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 75.
[75] Grace, "Counterpublics in Transit," 196-197.

presented as such. As examined earlier, the arts and culture sector in 1980s New York City was increasingly being seen as elitist and inaccessible for many New Yorkers. Yet, even supposed public spaces were being designed and created for consumption, changing the way people interacted with urban spaces. Phillips describes how contemporary public spaces are not truly public and are often controlled and designed by private companies. Phillips notes how our contemporary conception of public space is very different from "the public space of the town square, plaza, or common in which the public art of the past traditionally found its home."[76] The emphasis urban developments placed on consumption, especially in the late twentieth century, is equally examined by artist and writer Martha Rosler as she explains how 1980s "downtown architecture" has been redesigned around consumerism through the creations of passageways both above and below ground that "remove the pedestrian/shopper from the street." While her analysis of urban redevelopment does not apply as directly to Times Square where the street remains the primary means of accessing the area, she notes how "sites of public entertainment are also increasingly commodified and restricted […] The easy in-and-out of public access, the flow of bodies, is curbed by the flow of (commodity-derived) signification."[77] Through new urban developments, the freedom of movement usually accorded in public spaces becomes increasingly limited and controlled by private entities.

The accessibility of public art is dependent on who has control over public spaces and the motivations behind their creation. Philosophy professor Hilde Hein notes that art in public or free spaces and buildings can still be exclusionary to people through their "imposing architecture" and strong security measures. Furthermore, even outdoor common areas are not truly public as

[76] Phillips, "Out of Order," 192.
[77] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 19-20.

they are designed for constant movement, discouraging pedestrians from stopping.[78] Additionally, Lovejoy argues "postindustrial urban space" encourages feelings of disorientation and confusion, these being experiences that Lovejoy claims are only amplified by the presence of technology.[79] The feelings of disorientation provoked by new architectural developments align with feelings of alienation, anonymity, and individualism attributed to the modern city that McQuire highlights in his analysis of key texts written about the modern urban environment.[80] One of the scholars McQuire cites is German sociologist Georg Simmel, who explores the relationship between feelings of alienation and the urban environment in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" from 1903. While Simmel's essay reflects on an urban environment that would have been vastly different from that of the 1980s, his contemplation of urban alienation remains relevant, especially with the increasing presence of digital technologies in urban spaces. In his prescient essay, Simmel compares how people interact with each other in rural environments and urban environments as he notes there is a level of unfamiliarity between urban residents.[81] There is therefore a loss of shared community or sense of familiarity in urban environments which is only expanded by the ever-growing privatisation of these spaces. Novakov touches upon this idea in her dissertation's concluding remarks as she notes that *Messages to the Public* can be read as "an attempt at locating a remedy within the realm of social commentary, for urban isolationism as a manifestation of the loss of personal contact between one human being and another."[82] The ideas and images artists chose to share through *Messages*

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[78] Hilde Hein, "Innovation in Public Art," in *Public Art: Thinking Museums Differently* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2006), 84.
[79] Lovejoy, *Postmodern Currents*, 85.
[80] McQuire, *The Media City*, 133.
[81] Simmel explains that relationships in rural or small-town life are more personal, and everyone knows each other, compared to the more distant relationships people have in urban environments. Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The City Cultures Reader*, ed. by Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden (London: Routledge, 2000), 15-16.
[82] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 118.

to the Public become bridges between urban residents, both by providing a shared viewing experience and drawing attention to common issues that contribute to social isolation and division.

Additionally, Hein explains how "the public art found in privately owned spaces" gives private entities final say over what works are presented and how they are exhibited, which usually constrains work to that which aligns with their businesses.[83] Deutsche makes a similar assessment, as she explains the incentives businesses and corporations are given, especially in New York, to incorporate "the public" into their developments. Referring to these spaces as "private public space," Deutsche notes these spaces are not actually free or accessible to the entire New York public, revealing how private interests will always be prioritised and prevent such spaces from ever truly being public. This is not to say that there is no room for freedom of expression or authentic engagement with people through public art in privately owned or commercial spaces. Deutsche herself acknowledges that public art "can also question and resist those operations, revealing the suppressed contradictions within urban processes."[84] The unfixed and ever-changing boundaries between private and public space emphasises the importance of artworks like *Messages to the Public* that are site-specific.

There is therefore a need to define public spaces in the context of public art projects. Phillips argues public art is not public because of its location but "because of the kinds of questions it chooses to ask or address."[85] The presence of public artworks therefore encourages further consideration of what a "public space" is and how artists can challenge the boundaries between public and private space to engage with wider audiences in an outdoor or commercial

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[83] Hein, "Innovation in Public Art," 84.
[84] Deutsche, "Uneven Development," 56-57.
[85] Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art," 332.

environment. As Deutsche notes: "The impression of objectivity is real to the extent that the city is alienated from the social life of its inhabitants. The functionalization of the city, which presents space as politically neutral, merely utilitarian, is then filled with politics. For the notion that the city speaks for itself conceals the identity of those who speak through the city."[86] While Simmel may have claimed that "one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd," projects like *Messages to the Public* have the capacity to bring a sense of personality, solidarity, and varying perspectives to public spaces.[87] In her conclusion and final assessment of the project, Novakov suggests:

> The success of *Messages to the Public* perhaps lies in this apparent dialectic between the public and private. By inserting personal, deeply felt messages into an urban, often impersonal environment, the artists were able to inject a level of humanity into an otherwise inhumane scene. The viewers, upon seeing a personal message and responding to it on a personal level, are making a link between themselves and something outside themselves, thereby optimally gaining more of a sense of their own identities.[88]

In a time of social policies being enacted and retracted in the name of budget cuts, and urban redevelopment prioritising private companies, *Messages to the Public* confronts Times Square and its seemingly neutral position by using it as a platform for exploring the social and political issues impacting New York City's residents.

Understanding Community in *Messages to the Public*

In the following section of my thesis, I consider key claims used when evaluating the impact of public art projects, proposed by researchers Tim Hall and Iain Robertson. However, this section also introduces Hall and Robertson's critiques of public art claims and audience reception. I introduce their critiques as a means of considering how public art projects inspire different

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[86] Deutsche, "Uneven Development," 52.
[87] Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," 17.
[88] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 117.

considerations and questions than artworks in a traditional museum or gallery space do, and to further consider how the existing information on *Messages to the Public* can be evaluated.

In Hall and Robertson's analysis of seven key contemporary claims used in favour of public art, two of these claims stand out in the context of *Messages to the Public*: that these projects can create "a sense of community" and that they can combat feelings of alienation. Hall and Robertson explain that "arts advocates have argued that public art can intervene and help rejuvenate severed social connections, both by promoting community discovery and awareness and by directly enhancing social connections." Yet Hall and Robertson critique these claims and make clear that it is incredibly difficult to truly gauge the impact that public art projects have on their communities and people outside of the art world, especially in the context of activist art. [89] However, *Messages to the Public* nonetheless exemplifies these key claims and the ways in which artists and organizations were thinking about community and solidarity through public art.

Specifically in the context of *Messages to the Public*, thanks to demographic statistics done by Spectacolor, we have some idea of who the audience viewing this project may have been. According to statistics provided to Novakov by Spectacolor from a survey conducted in 1989, 1.5 million people moved through Times Square per day, and 19 million people were photographing Times Square annually. The majority of Spectacolor viewers were between 18 and 34 years old, held a college diploma, and were New York City residents.[90] The statistics match those used in a 1983 article about the project which states: "With more than a million people a day passing through Times Square, it is the prime spot for anyone with a message […] Now the 'crossroads of the world' has become a place for visual artists to get their own messages

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[89] Tim Hall, and Iain Robertson, "Public Art and Urban Regeneration: Advocacy, Claims and Critical Debates," *Landscape Research* 26, no. 1 (2001): 10-15 & 17-18, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1080/01426390120024457open_in_new.
[90] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 233-236.

to the public–via 800 square feet of colored light bulbs on a computerized billboard."[91] Additionally, an anecdote shared with *The New York Times* in 1983 by then PAF project director Jessica Cusick recounts how the PAF had been told by a taxi driver that "he gets all these German tourists who ask to be taken to Times Square to see the electronic art."[92] Such an anecdote is difficult to confirm, but it does indicate that there was a diverse interest in the project that reached beyond New York City residents. While these statistics and stories do not provide any information on the long-term impacts of the project, I argue the lightboard's location in Times Square as opposed to the East Village or SoHo, areas of New York City that were associated with the art world and alternative art scene, and its apparent popularity indicate it was reaching wide audiences and its messages were resonating with viewers.

Artists Jerri Allyn and Les Levine, whose works were projected in 1987 and 1985 respectively, conducted their own surveys of Times Square to try to gauge the response to their individual works for the project. While their results were never published publicly, Novakov summarises their work which concluded that the people surveyed generally knew about the lightboard and that the Times Square public was the intended audience of its messages, but they did not necessarily recognize it as an art project. Novakov states, "it is possible to conclude that even within the context of a glut of commercial advertising, the Public Art Fund messages in the Times Square environment stood out as being apart, at least in didactic terms, from the surrounding messages."[93] It is this distinct yet unidentifiable experience that Phillips praises in her article on the project as she emphasises the significance of viewers having an "unregulated" experience with *Messages to the Public*. While there were some people who were aware of the

[91] Bibb, "Millions See Art in Lights Over Broadway."
[92] Jessica Cusick, quoted in Michael Winerip, "Computerized Billboard Brightens Up Times Sq. with Art-of-the-Month," *New York Times*, Aug. 26, 1983.
[93] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 74-75.

project and where to find it, Phillips explains that a lot of the power of *Messages to the Public* comes from the fact that viewers are "unfamiliar with the Public Art Fund, with the participating artists, or with this strange convergence of art images and advertisements."[94] Therefore, while we may not have comprehensive information on audiences' reactions to or understanding of the project, *Messages to the Public*'s impact can be examined through the direct relationship it created between art and the Times Square public, and between contemporary politics and Times Square itself.

As Rosler notes, when considering a public artwork, everyone forms "the art audience" but "the widest audience is made up of onlookers" who have some basic understanding of art but are not connected to or involved in the art world.[95] Rosler explains: "The 'audience,' then, is a shifting entity whose composition depends not only on who is out there but on whom you want to reach with a particular type of work, and why."[96] In sharing messages related to current issues in the city, such as housing instability, rising poverty, and growing health concerns, we can read the participating artists' intended audience as anyone in the city who may be impacted by these issues or uninformed on them. As Lippard explains: "A true cultural democracy would encourage artists to speak for themselves and for their communities, and it would give all of us access to audiences both like and unlike ourselves."[97] The wide range of issues and themes artists explore in the project reaffirms that artists were using their site-specific artworks to communicate messages that resonated with them, and that they personally felt needed more attention from broader audiences, as opposed to the generally applicable and neutral statements

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[94] Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art," 334.
[95] Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. by Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 313.
[96] Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers," 323.
[97] Lippard, "Trojan Horses," 342.

that Hall and Robertson claim make up much of public art.[98] Whether it be the informed and in-the-know viewer, or the unfamiliar passerby who happened to catch one of the thirty second messages, through this project the Times Square audience had the opportunity to interact with text and images that challenged viewers' expectations of a commercial area.

The power of community outreach and sense of solidarity that public art projects can ignite is equally explored by Miles. In his chapter "Art as a Social Process," Miles explores ideas of reintegration and interconnection that artist Suzi Gablik and art historian Moira Roth each examine in their respective work. Miles presents contemporary public art projects as a means of allowing viewers to find connection through "visions of commonality." Miles highlights projects centered around ideas of "sociation" and "community building" as a way of addressing social issues, specifically those related to healthcare and homelessness.[99] The idea of connection in art is also explored by Lippard as she explains, "most activist artists are trying to be synthesizers as well as catalysts; trying to combine social action, social theory, and the fine arts tradition, in a spirit of multiplicity and integration, rather than one of narrowing choices."[100] Thus, the information and images shared by artists during *Messages to the Public* can be seen as a way of informing broader publics about pressing issues while simultaneously creating shared experiences of solidarity for people in a hyper-commodified and controlled space like Times Square. While there may not be expansive audience feedback to consult due to the nature of public art projects, the success of projects such as this one can also be examined through their ability to explore varying themes and images that bring lesser explored or represented issues and ideas to a major platform.

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[98] Hall, "Public Art and Urban Regeneration," 20.
[99] Miles, "Art as a Social Process," 166-169.
[100] Lippard, "Trojan Horses," 342.

As Phillips states: “Public art is like other art, but it is potentially enriched and amended by a multiplicity of philosophical, political, and civic issues. It need not seek some common denominator or express some common good to be public, but it can provide a visual language to express and explore the dynamic, temporal conditions of the collective.”[101] The targeting of the collective and exploration of shared experiences is reaffirmed in works like American photographer Anne Turyn’s *What if the sky were orange*, displayed from September 1, 1988 to September 30, 1988. In this work, Turyn presents a series of questions such as “WHAT IF EVERYONE HAD A HOME” (fig. 2) and “WHAT IF EVERYONE COULD READ” (fig. 3). Turyn’s text was presented in yellow lights against different coloured backgrounds. The individual statements are clear and direct in both their visual style and messages. However, as stated in the PAF’s press release for the project: “She omits question marks from her message because she does not wish to ask questions but to suggest concepts.”[102] Through these questions/statements, Turyn presents passersby with the opportunity to contemplate equity and remind people that privileges often taken for granted, like housing and literacy, are not a reality for everyone. Moreover, she forces viewers to confront their own privileges and the potential actions that can be taken in response to these statements. Works like Turyn’s therefore contribute to bringing a sense of community and shared belonging to the city by amplifying issues that contribute to social isolation and inequality, making them concerns everyone must address.

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[101] Phillips, “Temporality and Public Art,” 332.

[102] *Public Art Fund Presents Anne Turyn at Times Square*, August 1988, Public Art Fund Archive, MSS 270, Box 30, Folder 19, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, New York City, NY, United States of America.

Section 3: Activism and Information in *Messages to the Public*

One of the key questions Novakov poses in her dissertation is: "When given access to the public sphere why do so many artists […] choose to make social statements?"[103] While Novakov traces the history of artistic activism back to the 1960s and artists' desire to make work that contributes to social and political change, the medium of *Messages to the Public* proves an interesting point for considering how and what type of information was shared in the 1980s.[104] As Hein notes: "Protest art relies for its significance on the power of immediacy. Its shock effect, a potential invitation to action, is premised upon public awareness of the controversy at issue. Once that is forgotten, the public function of the art is gone, and it reverts to aesthetic objecthood, prone to neglect and casual abuse."[105] In an age where people were consuming information so rapidly and were constantly exposed to new images, how do artists make impactful and meaningful activist works?

The need for rapid and timely information in an age of constant consumption is thoroughly examined by Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman presents the idea of the "information-action ratio" as he explains that for a long time the information that was shared and accessible was valued based on the responses it evoked. However:

> The situation created by telegraphy, and then exacerbated by later technologies, made the relationship between information and action both abstract and remote. For the first time in human history, people were faced with the problem of information glut, which means that simultaneously they were faced with the problem of diminished social and political potency.[106]

Postman lists several social and political issues, questioning what action the reader plans to take in response to the constant influx of information they receive, concluding that people end up in a

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[103] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 38.
[104] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 39.
[105] Hein, "Innovation in Public Art," 94.
[106] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 68.

cycle of receiving and repeating information without any concrete action.[107] Postman's "information-action ratio" therefore asks readers to reflect on how the information they receive does, or does not, inspire a response or reaction.

Messages to the Public can be read as artists performing a certain action in response to the influx of information both themselves and others are receiving. However, the project can also be examined based on what type of action it elicits. While it is difficult to gauge the effects that public art projects have on their viewers, we can consider what issues artists were responding to and what sentiment their works may have been aiming to elicit from viewers. *Messages to the Public* therefore serves as an example of artists turning this "information glut," as Postman describes, into clear and direct information that both feels pressing and has the capacity to inspire true action in the Times Square public.

Key Issues Artists Were Responding To

Through the sharing of information, statistics, and statements about current social and political issues in their thirty second spots on the Spectacolor board, artists reaffirmed the urgency of their chosen subjects. It is then important to understand the context in which these artists were working. While artists were exploring various key issues impacting the city and its residents, I have chosen to focus specifically on works responding to issues related to public health, housing, and wealth inequality. While participating artists responded to and engaged with numerous causes and ideas that had both national and international reach, I have chosen these issues because they were drastically impacted and exacerbated by the 1975 fiscal crisis, making them both local to the New York City context and timely.

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[107] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 68-69.

As previously examined, the 1975 fiscal crisis resulted in drastic changes to New York City's social services. Health related agencies were among those government agencies most impacted by the EFCB's recommended budget cuts. As public health researchers Nicholas Freudenberg, Marianne Fahs, Sandro Galea, and Andrew Greenberg note, "between 1974 and 1977, the Department of Health (DOH) budget was cut by 20%," there was a significant decrease in its workforce, many clinics and health services were closed, programs related to addiction treatment were severely diminished, and much more.[108] Freudenberg et al. credits these policies with contributing to the tuberculosis, HIV, and homicide "syndemic" that New York City experienced in the 1980s-1990s.[109] There was a growing crisis developing in the city as numerous interconnected social issues and sudden bureaucratic changes drastically impacted the quality of life of a large portion of the population.

Access to healthcare, and specifically the government's response to the AIDS crisis, was a key issue that artists and activists were responding to, especially those based in New York City, where people were being greatly affected. As Burk explains, "the AIDS epidemic […] unleashed the prejudice and moral judgement of reactionary conservatives toward the minority demographics who were initially hit hardest by AIDS, including gay men, intravenous drug users, and people of color."[110] Jeffrey Pittu used his work for *Messages to the Public*, which ran from January 1, 1989, to January 15, 1989, to draw attention to the AIDS crisis. The PAF archives indicate that Pittu's design was developed in collaboration with ACT UP (AIDS

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[108] Among those agencies dismantled was the Addiction Services Agency, despite statistics showing there had been a decrease in drug related crime rates since its establishment in 1967. By 1977 the city had pushed all drug and alcohol related management to state agencies. Freudenberg, "The Impact of New York City's 1975 Fiscal Crisis," 424-425.

[109] Freudenberg et al. define a "syndemic" as "2 or more epidemics, with biological determinants and social conditions interacting synergistically, that contribute to an excess burden of disease in a population," Freudenberg, "The Impact of New York City's 1975 Fiscal Crisis," 424.

[110] Burk, "Radical Distribution," 437.

Coalition to Unleash Power), an activist group founded in 1987 in New York City in response to the AIDS crisis.[111] Pittu's work projected the text and imagery of ACT UP such as their slogan "SILENCE=DEATH" (fig. 4), calls to action, and the statistic "AIDS 43,000 DEAD USA" (fig. 5). In projecting a concrete number of those who have died of AIDS in the United States, Pittu's work draws attention to the scale of the AIDS crisis and the actions, or inactions, that have contributed to it. Moreover, the images that exist of Pittu's work show that the designs remained simplistic. Each statement or word had its own moment on the board in yellow lights with, for the most part, no additional imagery or designs. Pittu's choice of text style, size, and colour makes the words just as prominent and legible as the Zipper news board that was located directly below the Spectacolor sign. The similarities between the text on the two lightboards places the AIDS crisis and ACT UP's work as being just as timely, urgent, and important for the Times Square audience as the formal news below it. Pittu's work therefore brought a crisis that was still not receiving the mainstream coverage it required to a major audience through an incredibly visible platform, reaffirming the urgency of the AIDS crisis. Pittu's board serves as an example of artists using their work in the project to engage with and publicize issues that were being overlooked publicly and were isolating people within the city.

Pittu's usage of the Spectacolor board to highlight the AIDS crisis reflects concerns art historian Douglas Crimp presents about art related to the AIDS crisis. In his essay "AIDS Demo Graphics," Crimp notes how the growing art world interest in AIDS activist art caused activists to question who their intended audience was. Crimp explains how the designs of AIDS activist artworks "function as an organizing tool, by conveying, in compressed form, information and political positions to others affected by the epidemic, to onlookers at demonstrations, and to the

[111] Pittu, Jeffrey – "Untitled", 1988, inclusive, Public Art Fund Archive, MSS 270, Box 29, Folder 14, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, New York City, NY, United States of America.

dominant media. But their primary audience is the movement itself."[112] Considering Pittu's engagement with concrete statistics and his usage of ACT UP's slogans and designs, his display can be evaluated as an activist work speaking to others involved in the cause while expanding information and activism beyond a traditional art world viewership.

Another key issue several artists engaged with in their works was housing and wealth inequality. Brooklyn-born artist Martha Rosler's work, *Housing is a Human Right*, which ran from March 1, 1989 to March 31, 1989, draws attention to access to affordable housing in New York City and how gentrification was negatively impacting housing in the city. Her work for *Messages to the Public* directly aligned with her exhibition *If You Lived Here…* which ran from 1987-1989 in collaboration with the Dia Art Foundation. *If You Lived Here…* expanded beyond gallery exhibitions and included town hall discussions and community projects all centered around issues and ideas related to housing and homelessness in New York City. In 1991, the Dia Art Foundation published the book *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism* as a summary of and companion to the project. In her chapter for the book, Rosler describes the state of housing in New York City and the background issues that led to so many people becoming unhoused. Rosler explains how the Reagan administration of the 1980s significantly cut support for "low-income public housing construction," reducing the funding for these projects "from $37 billion in 1981 to $16 billion in 1985 and to $7 billion in 1988."[113] As Greenberg notes, New York City experienced a rapid increase in the number of people living in poverty from the late 1970s to early 1980s with a quarter of all New Yorkers being impacted.[114]

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[112] Douglas Crimp, "AIDS Demo Graphics," in *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Allan Klusaček and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1992), 54-56.
[113] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 29.
[114] Greenberg, "New York as a Symbol of Neoliberalism," 239-240.

At the same time, wealth within New York City was expanding, creating significant income gaps between the city's wealthiest and poorest residents.[115]

For her work in *Messages to the Public*, Rosler shares similar statistics to those in her chapter for *If You Lived Here*. Her board displays how much federal funding had been cut for low-income housing projects in recent years, sharing concrete numbers such as: "1985-$12BIL. 1987-$7BIL" (fig. 6). Her design also includes images of crumbling buildings, running figures, dollar signs, and displays key words such as "GENTRIFICATION" (fig. 7). Rosler's use of images and text demonstrates how she took full advantage of the lightboard's capacity for animation and repetitive imagery, as she presents viewers with a clear narrative of urban redevelopment and government cuts throughout the 1980s. In her chapter, Rosler draws attention to what she perceives to be the causes of housing insecurity in the city. She points to how "rather than seriously attacking the problem of homelessness–rather than a *war on homelessness*–the government has chosen to mobilize against drugs, […] successfully replacing 'homelessness' with 'drugs' as America's number one problem"[116] Moreover, Rosler cites "government policy" as one of the key contributors to homelessness.[117] The ways in which government policy was impacting homelessness can be seen in the resulting cuts of the 1975 fiscal crisis in welfare assistance and municipal jobs, "severely constricting 2 paths out of poverty."[118] As Greenberg explains, many of the public services that low-income residents had relied on and were cut following the fiscal crisis were replaced with privatised services that were unaffordable for many New Yorkers.[119] There was a serious concern that the most vulnerable populations of New York

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[115] Greenberg, "New York as a Symbol of Neoliberalism," 241-242.
[116] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 25.
[117] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 25.
[118] Freudenberg, "The Impact of New York City's 1975 Fiscal Crisis," 426.
[119] Greenberg, "New York as a Symbol of Neoliberalism," 243.

City were being ignored and cut-out under the city's redevelopment. Rosler's choice of message for *Messages to the Public* demonstrates how artists like Rosler were using their position in the art world and access to such a platform to draw attention to issues impacting the city's working-class population and call into question the redeveloped area in which they were exhibiting.

However, more than just governmental policies, Rosler's work draws attention to the connection between issues of homelessness in New York City and the art world at this time. In her chapter for *If You Lived Here…*, Deutsche explains how many people became "displaced" and unhoused in the Villages as a result of gentrification and rising real estate prices aided by expanding galleries and artist studios.[120] While Rosler explains that her intention with the exhibition *If You Lived Here…* was "to blur 'inside' and 'outside,' to abolish the distinction between the gallery space as a large, squarish room and as a world apart, a zone of aestheticism," she also admits that "there's no denying that no matter how the works in 'If You Lived Here…' originally were woven into the social fabric, the venue of the exhibitions was an art gallery, even if partly 'transformed.'"[121] Rosler's work in *Messages to the Public* can then be read as her using an even bigger, more accessible, and untraditional platform (for the art world) to share information with an even wider public that cannot be reached from the traditional gallery space. Moreover, Rosler's work demonstrates how artists can use commercial spaces and public art projects to engage with and inform people about pressing social issues while questioning the very spaces and resources that have made their art possible.

American writer Lynne Tillman's work *What Are Values?* which ran from January 12, 1987 to January 26, 1987, also shares information and statistics about current issues in New

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[120] Rosalyn Deutsche, "Alternative Space," in *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*, ed. by Brian Wallis (Bay Press, 1991), 48.
[121] Rosler, "Fragments of a Metropolitan Viewpoint," 35-36.

York City related to wealth inequality. Tillman's message displayed different "values" such as: "34 MILLION AMERICANS ARE BELOW POVERTY LEVEL." (fig. 8), and "WEALTHY AMERICANS HAVE A 15% BETTER CHANCE OF SURVIVING CANCER THAN POOR AMERICANS." (fig. 9). Similar to Pittu's work, Tillman's "values" were presented in yellow lights against the board's unlit black backdrop, creating almost a synchronicity between her text and the news displayed directly below it. In this context, Tillman's statements move beyond artwork and become a piece of public information. In the PAF's press release for *What Are Values?* they explain that "Tillman publicizes statistics which she believes reflect values which are important to the American people."[122] The press release also includes a quote from Tillman explaining: "The message is an attempt to highlight the inequities within the system, and my hope is that each person who reads this message stops to think about what these 'values' mean to him or her."[123] Like Rosler, Tillman's "values" reflect growing issues related to poverty, access to healthcare, and wealth inequality that were disproportionately impacting the city's working-class populations. In drawing attention to these statistics and the inequality within American society, Tillman uses her work to encourage passersby to challenge the information they receive and the societal norms they live with.

All three of these works are especially poignant when put in the context that all this information was being shared within a twenty to thirty second time frame. The rapidity of advertising and information presented on televisions is a key critique Postman has of the medium. He explains:

> The commercial insists on an unprecedented brevity of expression. One may even say, instancy. A sixty-second commercial is prolix; thirty seconds is longer than most; fifteen

[122] *Lynne Tillman Presents "What Are Values?" at Times Square*, 11th January 1987, Public Art Fund Archive, MSS 270, Box 30, Folder 14, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries, New York City, NY, United States of America.
[123] *Lynne Tillman Presents "What Are Values?" at Times Square*.

> to twenty seconds is about average. This is a brash and startling structure for communication since […] the commercial always addresses itself to the psychological needs of the viewer.[124]

Postman continues by noting that "the commercial asks us to believe that all problems are solvable […] fast through the interventions of technology, techniques and chemistry."[125] The works of *Messages to the Public*, and those that shared statistics and facts like Pittu's, Rosler's, and Tillman's, thus present an alternate means of engaging with advertising and mass media technologies that utilizes the same methods and parameters of these mediums while sharing information that does not have a clear solution and requires communal solidarity, empathy, and education to address. As Novakov notes, "what all the artists shared was a desire to convey a concept that was important to them on a personal level and to have that message be perceived in some way by the Times Square audience."[126] By using the rapidity of advertising, these artists gave a sense of urgency and immediacy to their works while transforming this very medium into a tool for community outreach, education, and information.

[124] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 130.
[125] Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 130.
[126] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 114-115.

Section 4: The American Culture Wars, Funding, and Censorship

Public Funding for the Arts

While *Messages to the Public* was free for viewers to see, like all art projects and exhibitions, financial support was required to realise a new work each month. According to an article published in the *Times Daily* in 1983, Spectacolor spent approximately $40,000 a year lending its board and computer programmers to the project and the PAF would pay selected artists around $250 for their work.[127] As a non-profit, the PAF's funding sources varied, including public and private support.[128] However, both public and private support for the arts can greatly shape how exhibitions, artworks, and public art projects are developed. Additionally, both types of funding sources can influence the reception of an artwork and can equally threaten to compromise artistic vision and messaging.

In considering public funding, there are many different social and political factors that can influence the reliability and accessibility of municipal, state, or federal funding for the arts. Returning briefly to post-fiscal crisis New York City, in 1976 New York's Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) became its own independent department within the city which Miller-Davenport explains, "represented a significant escalation in municipal support for arts and culture."[129] However, the majority of the DCA's budget went to The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Miller-Davenport highlights "this bias toward elite, overwhelmingly white, institutions like the Met," and the state and municipality's support for more traditional arts institutions in contrast to the ways in which the city was pushing out more alternative or non-institutional arts. Focusing particularly on the way street art was targeted, Miller-Davenport explains how "even as New

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[127] Bibb, "Millions See Art in Lights Over Broadway."
[128] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 166.
[129] Miller-Davenport, "The Cultural Center of the World," 127.

York graffiti gained worldwide recognition for its artistry, the artists' subversive claims on public space threatened the city's official business-friendly image, wherein legitimate art was associated with the rarefied spaces of auction houses, museums, galleries, and private homes."[130] The alternative art spaces and public artworks of the late 1970s and 1980s represent a clear contrast to the more traditional artistic mediums and institutions that were being upheld through municipal and state funding. Yet, the PAF received support from the municipal government and Doris Freedman had been significantly involved in municipal decisions for public art initiatives up until her death.[131] The PAF, and subsequently *Messages to the Public*, had perhaps a unique position of being municipally connected and supported while showing the works of many artists primarily associated with the city's alternative art scene.

As federal and municipal policies were contributing to rising social issues in New York City such as access to housing, healthcare, and the severity of the AIDS crisis, there was also a greater conflict occurring nation-wide, centering the arts, known as the American culture wars. The NEA, which had provided funding for PAF projects including *Messages to the Public*, became a point of controversy in the late 1980s. When Reagan was elected President in 1981, his administration sought to cut the NEA's budget and became stricter on accepting grant proposals from artists and institutions.[132] As curator Brian Wallis notes, "conservatives had sought to abolish the NEA, regarding it a liberal luxury and a symbol of the 'excess of democracy' that had been allowed to flourish in the radical sixties."[133] Throughout the 1980s, the NEA faced ongoing conflict and backlash from different groups and figures, as artists supported by the program

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[130] Miller-Davenport, "The Cultural Center of the World," 131.
[131] Bogart, "The Patronage Frame," 395.
[132] Steven C. Dublin, "The Government as Patron: Angel or Demon?" in *Arresting Images: Impolitic Art and Uncivil Actions* (London: Routledge, 1992), 281.
[133] Brian Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Spaces," in *Alternative Art New York, 1965-1985*, ed. by Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 161.

created work that was more political in nature or did not align with what was considered more mainstream culture.[134] Writer and arts educator Philip Yenawine explains how as alternative art scenes and styles developed in the early 1980s and public programs supporting the arts expanded, many hoped it signified "that the government and private patrons would continue to support artistic experimentation and innovation, regardless of what it said or looked like." However, Yenawine argues the "culture wars" also brought alternative art into the mainstream culture where it became highly criticized and questioned.[135] The American culture wars would only reach a true breaking point in 1989.[136]

Despite the emphasis placed on alternative art in the national debates on arts funding, these spaces were only a small part of the NEA's overall funding, but as Wallis notes, "suffered a disproportionate amount of cuts to their budgets, often as punishment for supporting 'controversial' artists."[137] Moreover, limiting NEA funding and placing restrictions on what art it could support also influenced projects and exhibitions funded by the private sector because so many art institutions combined funding sources.[138] *Messages to the Public* had its own experiences with NEA-related funding cuts. In a 1989 article published by the *Los Angeles Times*, reporter Jan Breslauer notes, "the project recently lost its $27,000 or more in National Endowment for the Arts Inter-Arts support."[139] Breslauer explains the reason for the cut being that Inter-Arts applications "doubled while available funds remained the same" and asserts "the

[134] Dublin, "The Government as Patron," 283.
[135] Philip Yenawine, "Introduction: But What Has Changed?," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. by Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 9-10.
[136] Dublin, "The Government as Patron," 283.
[137] Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Spaces," 163.
[138] Carole S. Vance, "The War on Culture," in *Art Matters: How the Culture Wars Changed America*, ed. by Brian Wallis, Marianne Weems, and Philip Yenawine (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 228.
[139] Jan Breslauer, "A Spectacle of L.A. Art in New York's Times Square: Advertising: California artists have been decorating a billboard with 'Messages to the Public,' but loss of funding threatens the project," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 24, 1989.

NEA didn't deny the Spectacolor project funds for fear of controversy."[140] Yet, this does not mean the project or its participating artists were immune from censorship and outside control that aligned with broader national debates on American arts and culture.

Issues of Censorship

The drastic and rapid cut of federal support for alternative art programs and projects makes the prospect of private funding appealing, something Susan Freedman nods to in her interview with Breslauer for his article, as she suggests the PAF was looking towards corporate funding to make up for the support lost from the NEA.[141] However, private funding has its own problems and *Messages to the Public* was already operating under the oversight of Spectacolor and its owner George Stonbely. Like many other activist art projects at the time, participating artists experienced censorship from different levels of production. In an interview with Novakov, James Clark credits Stonbely for allowing artists to project "messages he totally disagreed with," and rejects the idea that there was any censorship of artist messages.[142] Similarly, in a 1982 interview with *The New York Times*, Spectacolor's art director Tom Gemignani states that "probably the most profitable thing for [Spectacolor], though, is working with other artists who are not of the same frame of mind."[143] The corporate value or profitability of supporting such a public art project is explained by Phillips as she notes how public art projects "can now not only boost a corporation's reputation as intelligent and concerned, but can also serve as the vehicle to demonstrate community spirit, a belief in the idea of place in an age of placeless architecture."[144]

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[140] Breslauer, "A Spectacle of L.A. Art in New York's Times Square."
[141] Breslauer, "A Spectacle of L.A. Art in New York's Times Square."
[142] James Clark, "Interview James Clark and Susan Freedman," interview by Anna Novakov, April 5, 1991, quoted in Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 167.
[143] Tom Gemignani, quoted in Brenson, "Art People; Art Lights Up Times Sq."
[144] Phillips, "Out of Order," 193.

Spectacolor's interest in implementing public art into the advertising board can be seen from the perspective of the publicity and public goodwill such a project can bring a company.

However, the public image of broad acceptance of differing perspectives does not accurately reflect artists experiences in the project. This can be seen in American artist Babara Kruger's work for the project, which was programmed from November 1, 1983 to November 30, 1983. For her display on the board, Kruger presented one long text that encouraged viewers to reflect on the news cycle and the way information about war is shared. Each section of the text was displayed in yellow lights with a red border around the board. Statements such as "I JUST WANT YOU TO THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU SEE WHEN YOU WATCH THE NEWS ON TV" (fig. 10) were included among the text. Kruger's work draws attention to the influence of mass media on society and the biases present in the news. Her text encourages a questioning of who controls the information that is made publicly accessible and the social factors that enable conflict. Kruger's message was removed from its spot in Spectacolor's advertising cycle one week after its display, with the reason being "because [Stonbely] felt it would be perceived as expressing Spectacolor's point of view."[145] Ultimately, Kruger's work was displayed again in its original form in February 1984, but this was not the last time an artist's work was censored from display.

In 1986, American artist Nancy Spero's message was cancelled while it was being programmed for the board. Spero's work shared a pro-choice message including the statement "THIS WOMB DOES NOT BELONG TO DOCTORS, LEGISLATORS, JUDGES, PRIESTS, THE STATE, ETC."[146] Spero had shared her message in previous exhibitions with other art groups, however, Stonbely, who had final say over all the programmed messages, disapproved of

[145] Russell Miller, "Messages Light Up Times Square," *Blade Toledo, Ohio*, February 19, 1984.
[146] Ellen Lubell, "Spectacolor Short-Circuits," *Village Voice*, February 10, 1987.

it. In an interview with *The Village Voice* about the situation, Jane Dickson states: "I wanted [*Messages to the Public*] to be a political forum when I organized it […] but Stonbely wanted decoration and no problems with his advertisers."[147] The conflict with Spero's design points to the downside of relying on private support for public art projects. As Ellen Lubell writes in her reporting on Spero's rejected design for *The Village Voice*: "None of the PAF's other programs are locked into sites owned by private individuals […] Private jurisdiction over publicly funded artists' work devaluates that work by subsuming the integrity and worth of an artists' expression to the needs and values of a private party. Spectacolor can't lose–but artists and taxpayers can."[148] Similarly, Colangelo argues one "weakness" in the display of art on public screens is the ways in which sourcing funding from external parties inherently forces the curatorial decisions to be shared with whoever is financially supporting the project.[149] Grace presents a similar argument as she explains how *Subculture* was officially sanctioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), and did so to avoid being removed or covered up, but nonetheless experienced censorship because this gave the MTA more influence over what was shared. As she explains, "ultimately, any project operating within the frame of dominant media runs the risk of underscoring that frame more than denaturing it."[150] While private ownership and funding may protect projects from sudden federal funding cuts like those experienced at the NEA, artists must still make concessions to whoever is supporting them.

While Kruger and Spero's experiences of censorship were some of the most reported on at the time, they were not the only artists who were given restrictions about what they could and

[147] Jane Dickson, quoted in Lubell, "Spectacolor Short-Circuits."
[148] Lubell, "Spectacolor Short-Circuits."; See Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 79 for her analysis of Lubell's quote and the censorship of Kruger and Spero's works in the project.
[149] Colangelo, "Curating Massive Media," 151-152.
[150] Grace, "Counterpublics in Transit," 190.

could not show. Novakov notes that during her interviews with participating artists, many of her interviewees described experiences of censorship in their work and the constraints they were given for their messages. Chilean artist Juan Downey's work *Information Withheld*, which ran from July 1, 1988 to July 31, 1988, was a direct response to Spectacolor's censorship. For his work, Downey projected only the phrase "INFORMATION WITHHELD" in response to the censorship he had experienced by Spectacolor and the PAF during his first proposal for the project several years prior (fig. 11). Additionally, artist Josely Carvalho claims in her interview with Novakov that artists were instructed that their works could not be focused on Times Square.[151] This comment is supported by artist Dara Birnbaum, whose work was never shown on the board and was intended to be a commentary on the relationship between Times Square and world news. In an interview with Birnbaum as a part of her article, Lubell notes: "Birnbaum feels that the program's subject matter has narrowed since her participation began, when the only *verboten* topic, according to her, was Times Square real estate."[152] These cases of censorship and restrictions on what type of messages were considered appropriate for the space allows us to reconsider how democratic and accessible public art truly is and the ways in which funding can strongly impact artistic vision and messaging.

Yet, despite instances of censorship, there was something challenging and even boundary pushing about the messages artists shared throughout *Messages to the Public*. Many participating artists did use their works to draw attention to the increasing role of consumerism and mass media in society, critique governmental policies, highlight environmental issues, housing issues, healthcare, and the AIDS crisis, all while being set against the highly privatised and commercial backdrop of Times Square. While they may have been discouraged from directly referencing

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[151] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 71.
[152] Lubell, "Spectacolor Short-Circuits."

Times Square, the themes explored in the individual projects nonetheless encouraged a questioning and reconsideration of the significance of the area. Phillips credits the temporary quality of *Messages to the Public* as a central component of artists' "willingness to engage difficult ideas and current issues in ways that more enduring projects cannot."[153] While some works in the project may have been hindered by censorship and the project was operating alongside broader national conflicts over the arts, as a whole the works that were realised offered viewers an opportunity to connect and engage with pressing and timely issues that were relevant to wide-ranging communities within the city and brought attention to topics that would typically go unacknowledged in such a space.

[153] Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art," 334-335.

Conclusion

In her analysis of Artangel Trust's Spectacolor project, Connolly notes that in exchanges between Carson from Artangel and Clark from the PAF in 1990, "Carson mentions the difficulty of regenerating media interest in Spectacolour *[sic]*."[154] While the London Spectacolor project was coming to its natural end after showing almost one tenth of the artists the PAF did, the PAF was maintaining consistent programming and continuing to receive media attention. However, *Messages to the Public* came to a sudden end in August of 1990 when Sony bought One Times Square. The board was officially taken down on September 1, 1990, and replaced with Sony's Jumbotron.[155]

In her 1987 article for *The Village Voice*, Lubell notes that former Spectacolor art director Piet Halberstadt "hinted that Stonbely is letting the 10-year-old lightboard deteriorate, perhaps waiting until he sees what will happen with proposed Times Square redevelopment."[156] Halberstadt's assessment was not far off, as the removal of the Spectacolor board and its replacement with Sony's Jumbotron that could play video was connected to a broader redevelopment of the area.[157] Times Square experienced a type of sanitization as large media companies like Warner Brothers Studios and Disney began redeveloping the area in their own image, making "an area that had been known in past decades for its high concentration of marginalized groups […] into a tourist-friendly amusement zone."[158] Times Square has maintained this image into the twenty-first century, with the area now being almost synonymous with contemporary tourism and commercial consumption.

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[154] Connolly, "Artangel and the Changing Mediascape of Public Art," 209.
[155] Novakov, "The Artist as Social Commentator," 119.
[156] Lubell, "Spectacolor Short-Circuits."
[157] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 80.
[158] Roost, "Recreating the City as Entertainment Center," 13-14.

While Times Square has changed, the legacy of *Messages to the Public* can be seen in other mass media based public art projects both in New York City and around the world. Times Square continues to integrate art into its billboards. Notably the PAF began a news series of video artworks that ran from 2000 to 2010 on the digital billboards in Times Square, and since 2012, Times Square Arts has supported the project *Midnight Moment* which allows artists to take over the advertising space on Times Square's numerous digital billboards every night at midnight.[159] However, as Colangelo notes, there is increasingly more interest in public screens on buildings that are non-commercial and can "capture audiences and compel them to view or even interact with artworks."[160]

Ultimately, *Messages to the Public* is unique in its intersection of technology, activism, and public art at a time of profound change not only in the New York City art world, but also in technology and political attitudes. *Messages to the Public* thus serves as a key example of how public art, specifically public art that is activist in nature and situated in urban spaces, can use a common area to reach varying communities, drawing attention to social and political issues at a time of uncertainty.

While the nature of public art makes it so that there is no concrete way to assess the impact of the project, the fact that the project lasted as long as it did and only ended because One Times Square was sold proves to some extent that the project was well received within the city and remained a beneficial source of artistic expression and exhibition for both the PAF and Spectacolor. Yet, more than just being an exhibition site, *Messages to the Public* was transforming the purpose of urban public space, moving from purely commercial messaging to messages sharing facts, statistics, and statements related to some of the city and world's most

[159] Dell'Aria, "Commercial Breaks," 81 & 88.
[160] Colangelo, "Curating Massive Media," 134-135.

pressing social and political issues of the time. From environmentalism to the AIDS crisis, to housing insecurity, and war, artists explored a variety of themes, ideas, and political ideologies and they did so by using a commercial platform to inform the public, questioning and filling in the gaps created by government policies and inaction. Through *Messages to the Public*, artists, and the PAF as a whole, explored the limitations and possibilities of contemporary advertising technology by transforming the medium into a platform for activism, information, and public education.

Figures

Figure 1. Jenny Holzer, *Messages to the Public*, 1982. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by John Marchael, Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 19, 2026.

Figure 2. Anne Turyn, *Messages to the Public: What if the Sky Were Orange*, 1988. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 3. Anne Turyn, *Messages to the Public: What if the Sky Were Orange*, 1988. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 4. Jeffrey Pittu, *Messages to the Public*, 1989. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 5. Jeffrey Pittu, *Messages to the Public*, 1989. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 6. Martha Rosler, *Messages to the Public: Housing is a Human Right*, 1989. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 7. Martha Rosler, *Messages to the Public: Housing is a Human Right*, 1989. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 8. Lynne Tillman, *Messages to the Public: What Are Values?*, 1987. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

Figure 9. Lynne Tillman, *Messages to the Public: What Are Values?*, 1987. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

This photo was removed because of copyright restrictions.

Figure 10. Barbara Kruger, *Messages to the Public*, 1983. Spectacolor lightboard, Public Art Fund. Image source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

This photo was removed because of copyright restrictions.

Figure 11. Juan Downey, *Messages to the Public: Information Withheld*, 1988. Spectacolor lightboard, photo by Jane Dickson, Public Art Fund. Image Source: Public Art Fund Website, accessed February 24, 2026.

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