

Beneath the Elevated Train Tracks, Art Will Imitate Queens

By ANNE BARNARD

For Hector Canonge, who makes much of his art on a laptop, and Chin Chih Yang, who likes to project his videos onto public buildings without permission until security guards approach, getting approval from layer after layer of bureaucracy is not usually a major part of the creative process.

But when the artists decided to place tree branches inside an enormous plastic globe on an island in the middle of Queens Boulevard in Sunnyside, under the elevated No. 7 train, they had to learn a lot about city regulations. The monthlong installation would be sponsored by the city's Department of Transportation as part of Queens Art Express, a festival celebrating art along city's busiest subway line.

The globe would have to be at least five feet from any curb, lest a car run into it or a spectator accidentally step into traffic. It had to avoid touching the hulking concrete supports of the elevated tracks, which belong to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. And it had to be less than 10 feet tall, or it would need a whole other set of approvals from the Buildings Department.

Completing the project "all depends on the signatures," Mr. Canonge said on Wednesday, still nervously awaiting final permission to pour the concrete for the tree's base and wondering if it would have time to dry before Saturday's opening.

But all the while, Emily Colasacco, who runs the Transportation Department's fledgling Urban Art Program, was in their corner. And above the site, at the 33rd Street-Rawson station, stained-glass windows by another artist, Yumi Heo, depict the diverse ethnic neighborhoods of Queens and demonstrate the transportation agency's commitment to what its art czar calls "art along the way."

Finally, all the signatures were in place. On Saturday, the artists were to install the work, called "100 Degrees," in a spot usually occupied by a fruit cart, a newspaper vendor and crowds of commuters. They will ask passers-by to write their thoughts about global warming on green construction-paper leaves, and later they will wheel a projector around the space and shine it onto the massive concrete ceiling above, where observers will see their own silhouettes against a video collage of nature footage.

It was perhaps fitting, for a centerpiece of Queens Art Express, that the artists had to balance their anything-goes vision with the utilitarian requirements



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Chin Chih Yang, above left, and Hector Canonge working on their installation under the Flushing Line tracks in Sunnyside, Queens. At left, a rendering of what it is expected to look like.



of pedestrian safety near a subway line that carries riders on 450,000 trips every weekday.

The festival, this weekend and next, showcases the coming of age of Queens as a hotbed of art — especially along the No. 7 line, The subway line, often called the International Express for its journey through Nepalese, Chinese, Ecuadorean and countless other immigrant communities, has long made the area a magnet for all kinds of New Yorkers, including artists looking for affordable quality of life.

When the Queens Council on the Arts, which organized the festival, was established 40 years ago, there were only "a handful" of scruffy nonprofit arts groups

in the borough, said Hoong Yee Lee Krakauer, the council's executive director; now there are several hundred. A few church-based galleries have morphed into SoHo-like concentrations in Long Island City and Flushing and a growing scene in Jackson Heights. Up to 700 artists are in regular contact with the council, and about 200 apply for grants yearly, Ms. Krakauer said.

John Hoban, the general manager of the No. 7 line, grew up along its elevated tracks in Corona and is fascinated with subway art, going back to the tile mosaics from the early 20th century.

He said that the authority was promoting the festival on posters to show that "the 7 takes you

there" in just a few minutes from Times Square — and has plenty of extra capacity on weekends, with ridership dipping to 170,000 on Sundays.

Mr. Canonge, who was born in Argentina, and Mr. Yang, originally from Taiwan, crossed paths while presenting their recent work at a gathering at the Queens Museum of Art.

Mr. Canonge's piece was a "sound map" of the 7 train: On a computer touch screen now on display at the Queens Center Mall, in Elmhurst, viewers can tap any station on a map of the line and hear recordings of the sounds of that neighborhood.

Mr. Yang's project consisted of gathering trash in Union Square, eating it — crunching down bits of a Styrofoam cup — and then videotaping himself on the toilet, in the privacy of his home, presumably passing the refuse.

The two later set up shop in a storefront on Astoria Boulevard, where Mr. Yang's wife does after-school tutoring, and planned their global excursion.

They collected branches pruned from trees in Queens, on Vernon Boulevard and in Kissena Park. They will be planted in a

concrete base — since transportation officials did not want the sculpture bolted to the sidewalk — and decorated with paper leaves. Then they will enclose the resulting tree, like a fragile boy in a bubble or a hothouse flower, in a custom-made overgrown beach ball printed with the continents in red.

Though Mr. Yang's inner guerrilla artist chafed at the rules, working with such constraints made the project interesting.

"What if someone goes and stabs it?" Mr. Canonge remembered one official asking. "Well," he answered, "it will be cut."

"What if someone does graffiti?"

"Great!"

But he was perplexed, he said, when someone asked if the video projection would damage the train supports. "We flipped out," he said. "It's just light!"

The installation begins Saturday at 1 p.m. Across the street, the New Thompson's Diner, which serves Caribbean food, will hold an informal reception at 6 p.m.

"I can't wait to see what it's going to look like," said Mr. Hoban, the train manager.