

TRAVEL | NYT NOW

Bright Passages Along the Northeast Corridor

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Heads Up

By **NELL McSHANE WULFHART**

The five-mile stretch of railroad track that slices through some of Philadelphia's most impoverished areas along the Northeast Corridor is dispiriting. It encompasses a wasteland of abandoned warehouses and buildings missing walls and roofs, neglected neighborhoods and graffiti-strewn passageways. Since mid-May, though, the area has been home to (and a scene on view for train commuters) a Christo-esque installation of seven enormous works of art by the Berlin-based visual artist Katharina Grosse, titled "psychylustro."

The area's selection was the answer to years of debate about what could be done with the blighted space. The installation is the first of its kind along the corridor, said an Amtrak spokesman, Craig Schulz.

"This corridor, a place that represented a postindustrial city in America, was the perfect spot for the artist's work," said Jane Golden, the executive director of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program, which organized the project. "We wanted to create a choreographed experience that moved viewers through time and space. We wanted to illuminate the rubble, the wild eruptions of nature, and we wanted to highlight the contradictions of decay and rebirth in this strange setting."

The Mural Arts Program has created more than 3,600 murals in Philadelphia, but "psychylustro" has the largest audience: nearly 34,000 people a day, mainly Amtrak travelers moving between New York and Washington, and some New Jersey Transit and Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority commuters who have a new reason to look up from their phones.

Ms. Grosse produces huge pieces in dazzling colors and has a tendency to color outside the lines. Her work has been shown at the Massachusetts

Museum of Contemporary Art, the Arken Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen and De Appel Art Center in Amsterdam, to name a few, helping build her reputation for excess. This installation is no exception: Her art takes the form of huge swaths of orange, green, pink and white, spray-painted by a team of artists onto walls, buildings and long strips of grass and trees. Her chosen sites are incoherent canvases — the structures are in varying states of disrepair, the walls are crumbling and full of holes, the paint slides from wall to ground, covering piles of rubble and weeds indiscriminately.

The sight of the art as the trains round the curves is less than startling — the work seems out of place but not shockingly so (on one trip I took, a woman initially mistook a bank of bright green grass for a part of the installation). It is a fleeting experience, less than 15 minutes, and the sites fly by at intervals, interspersed with views of decay, stretches of empty track and, at one point, a disconcertingly glorious view of the Schuylkill River as the train leaves Center City for North Philadelphia. Some critics have suggested the project uses urban decay as a stage set, romanticizing and masking it, rather than doing anything constructive. Ms. Golden says she welcomes such talk. “It has both refocused and broadened the conversation about this corridor.”

The audio guide, a hat tip to a museum experience, is available by phone (215-525-1045) as the train passes through the corridor. The guide has three options, including an interpretation by the Philadelphia-based sound artist Jesse Kudler. The soundtrack is composed of synthesized tones and recordings that Mr. Kudler collected from the mural sites themselves, as well as from inside trains and stations; it calls attention to the way the mural sites suddenly appear with patches of unexpected sound. The audio guide includes an interview with Ms. Grosse and background on the history of the corridor, but it’s the soundtrack that should be experienced in real time.

Planned obsolescence is an integral part of “psychylustro.” Ms. Grosse used Benjamin Moore house paint, unprotected by sealant, that will gradually wear off, and the installation will be maintained against graffiti (which has already begun to appear on the walls) only for the first six months. After that, it will be at the mercy of the graffiti artists and the weather. Ms. Grosse’s work will soon erode, leaving streaks of color that will eventually demand no attention whatsoever from passengers on their daily commutes.

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