

AUGUST 13, 2015

INSTAGRAM'S MARK ON PUBLIC ART

BY ANTWAUN SARGENT

Hank Willis Thomas's latest show continues the artist's decade-long fascination with truth, with black-and-white, comic-book-inspired speech-balloon signs that span the promenade of the MetroTech Commons park.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY JAMES EWING / THE CAUSE COLLECTIVE



Last Tuesday, the Public Art Fund assembled a group of art-world Instagram “influencers,” in the middle of the park at MetroTech Commons, in downtown Brooklyn. They were there to get a first look at the artist Hank Willis Thomas’s new show, “Hank Willis Thomas: The Truth Is I See You” (http://www.publicartfund.org/view/exhibitions/6080_hank_willis_thomas_the_truth), which is on view through June, 2016. This latest show continues the artist’s decade-long fascination with truth, with black-and-white, comic-book-inspired speech-balloon signs that span the promenade of the park. The twenty-two large signs display statements like “The truth is I judge you,” and “The truth is I love you” (<https://instagram.com/p/5-uIAjIQIR/?tagged=pafmeet>), in a myriad of languages (<https://instagram.com/p/5-h8TuMpro/?tagged=pafmeet>) spoken across Brooklyn. “We live in a world where English is the most dominant form of communication and so much is lost in translation or overshadowed. You know some languages don’t even have a word for the truth,” Thomas told the crowd.

“Does everyone have their phones?” Thomas called out as he sat inside “Ruth,” one of two steel benches (<https://instagram.com/p/5-fIzLRZj6/?tagged=pafmeet>) shaped like the speech-balloon signs that he created for the show. “When I was at N.Y.U., my photography professor would say, ‘If you sent eight photographers out to shoot one thing, they would come back with eight different stories,’” he told the crowd. Using the hashtag #PAFmeet (<https://instagram.com/explore/tags/pafmeet/>), for Public Art Fund, the group set off to stage the perfect photographs for their followers. Andria Hickey, the exhibition’s curator, explained to me that one of the conceptual goals of the project is to have Brooklyn residents visit the park and try to pronounce the truth phrases in a language other than their own, to start a conversation about communication and celebrate the diversity of the city.

Gatherings like Thomas’s are called “Instameets,” and they are designed to give Instagram enthusiasts with large followings a chance to creatively capture and share photos, in an effort to drum up visibility for art exhibitions. It is a method that has spread throughout the art world. The Guggenheim Museum regularly holds #EmptyGuggenheim (<https://instagram.com/explore/tags/emptyguggenheim/>)

Instagram previews, along with traditional openings. In June, for the opening of their summer group show, “Storylines: Contemporary Art at the Guggenheim,” a select group was allowed in the museum before it opened, and invited to Instagram more than a hundred newly acquired works. The week before Thomas’s opening, the commissioner of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Tom Finkelpearl took a group of Instagrammers on a bus tour, to show off Brooklyn’s public art (<https://instagram.com/explore/tags/nycultureonwheels/>). “Before this administration the Department of Cultural Affairs had no digital strategy. We are trying to get the word out,” Finkelpearl told me.

In the early two-thousands, Thomas began manipulating popular-print advertisements as a way to expose what he saw as the truth about ads’ power to create false narratives about race and sexuality. For his 2006 exhibition, “B®anded” (http://www.hankwillisthomas.com/media/original/HWT_CV_July_2015.pdf),” he inscribed scars in the shape of the Nike swoosh (<http://www.hankwillisthomas.com/WORKS/Photographic-/1>) on the chest and head of a black model—a metaphor for Thomas’s belief that corporate America, by way of its attempts to advertise products to niche markets, perpetuates stereotypes and corrupts identity-formation. He followed that series with “Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America, 1968-2008” (<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/unbranded>),” and “Unbranded: A Century of White Women, 1915-2015” (<http://www.jackshainman.com/exhibitions/past/2015/hank-willis-thomas/>).” In both shows, Thomas digitally removed logos and text from popular-print advertisements he found in magazines. “Unbranded,” represents Thomas’s attempt to untie the knot that he tried to draw our attention to in “B®anded.”

The August meet-up was Thomas’s first opening organized around Instagram. But the artist who built his career manipulating photography is a prolific user (<https://instagram.com/hankwillisthomas/>) and has more than thirty-seven thousand followers on the site. “I use it as a diary and somewhat of a sketchbook, and then as an exhibition space,” Thomas told me. “Because I know I do work in all of these different mediums and all over the country and in different parts of the world, most people I know won’t have a chance to see the work.”

Using Instagram as a digital-marketing ploy to promote art helps to increase the attendance and visibility of artists and exhibitions. And it’s easy to hope that the desire to take a photo of a piece of art would inspire a wider interest in the art work. But the photographs shared from MetroTech Commons generally lacked the didactic nature of the sculptures that hang throughout the park. One photo shows a visitor posing with her mouth open, pretending to eat a sign that says “truth” on it. Another one shows a woman holding her dog in the air underneath a “love” sculpture. The whole practice calls into question the role of art in society: Should it always be educational? Is there a right way to engage with art? Since 2011, Thomas has been using the hashtag #InSearchOfTheTruth

(<https://instagram.com/explore/tags/insearchofthetruth/>). “People used to make marks on trees to signify that they been somewhere—now we have hashtags for that,” he said. Perhaps, for Thomas, being there, and showing other people, is enough.

Miss Pickle (<https://instagram.com/picklebeholding/>) is a French bulldog who has a burgeoning Instagram following and who only takes photos in front of works of art. Thomas and Miss Pickle posed on a speech-balloon bench, as the dog’s owner convinced her with relative ease to look at the digital camera. Thomas lay down on the bench (<https://instagram.com/p/5-fXh9o7g0/?taken-by=picklebeholding>), put his sunglasses on, and smiled.
