



YellowArrow Aimed at Building Art Community

Performance art project scatters stickers to bring together global citizens

It's very simple. You see a sticker, a yellow arrow pointing to a building, a car, a fire hydrant, a rock, a small dog, etc. You pull out your cell phone and text-message the sticker's code to the phone number provided and then receive a short phrase of poetic or historical explanation that reveals the importance of the object. Then you place a few arrows of your own, and suddenly you're part of a global community of people linked to each other through the expression of their love for a place.

This is the basic idea behind YellowArrow, a project with roots in performance art that started in New York this summer and has since spread across the country and throughout the world. From Berlin to California, people are enlivening cities with these bright yellow stickers and with the forum for communication they provide. Anyone can get involved by going to the website or by simply text-messaging the code whenever they spot yellow arrow. It's been called a game, a form of graffiti, and the largest performance art piece ever attempted. More than just a scattering of random arrows, the project aims to create communities and bring people together.

YellowArrow stemmed from the production of warehouse-sized exhibits where the audience took themselves on a voyage through the space and were inundated with visual art and performances. Fascinated by this notion of journeys, the project's creators decided to take the same idea and expand it to a city, and then connect the cities into a global network of people creating interesting journeys for each other.

The project is also part pop art. Its bright yellow stickers are similar to ads in that they publicize whatever objects or places a person chooses. Like most modern promotions, YellowArrow uses the latest technology to reach the widest audience with the greatest ease.

But for this marketing technique, the promoters are every day people, and the profit comes not in green bills but in a sense of affecting another person's life with the importance of your personal knowledge. The YellowArrow art form harnesses the power of commercialism and modern technology to create a global mosaic of anonymously volunteered place-specific information united through ordinary cell phones and the internet.

Like other performance art projects, YellowArrow pushes the boundary between what is considered art. But by taking the project into the streets and putting the power of expression in the hands of the everyday Joe, YellowArrow is not only continuing the reclassification of "art" and "gallery," but also radically expanding the definition of an artist.

Anyone can actively participate in the project; the only requirements are the ability to text message and access to the internet. The freedom of expression is extended to everyone from professional artist to pedestrian dreamers to the plumber who knows the best pizza place in town.

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Three Dreamers

Behind the savvy design and implementation of the YellowArrow project lies a trio of Columbia grads and their mastermind leader. Christopher Allen, Brian House and Jesse Shapins were good friends during college. Shapins took his degree in urban studies and went to Berlin to start an arts group focused on seeing cities in a new, more perceptive way. House, with a background in computer science and interactive art projects, headed to Sweden

for an intermedia graduate program, while Allen set off for Brooklyn to work with Michael Counts and the arts institution called Gale Gates.

Famous for large-scale installation projects and called a “mad genius” by The New York Times, Counts supported the proposal to create an installation on an even larger scale: an entire city or even the world. Allen called together his friends, and YellowArrow was born. With their varied expertise in artistic expression, urban environments and computer science, they form a dynamic trio ready to produce perhaps the largest art project ever attempted.

“It’s a lot about looking at trends in online communities and online projects and seeing these groups that are forming, but they’re all based around their computer,” Shapins says, explaining that the group has “a real interest in trying to take that sort of energy and bring it into real life, bring it into a more face-to-face encounters, and giving people some context for doing that.”

But it’s more than just a way to meet people: “So much of what the web has done is made everything accessible all over the place, but what is it that you can only get where you are, what makes your present moment feel more rich, deeper, more privileged?” Chris asks. He speaks of the “anonymity and gift-economy that’s created by hiding these messages throughout the city,” adding “you could walk into voyeuristically another person’s thoughts that are from a different space, a layer of history or experience.”

YellowArrow is “creating a myth, creating stories, having stories about place, having stories about different imaginative narratives come to life and be a subject of conversation,” says Shapins, “a lot of what you see is a collective art project where every person has the opportunity to be an artist. In just the simple act of placing a sticker and participating, you’re doing an artistic act that’s part of this much larger art work.” For this crew, it’s about “creating art projects that have a deeper meaning but that are very accessible to a very broad public.” And as Chris points out, “it’s a sticker, it’s cool.”

The public has responded with enthusiasm, with participants from around the globe. One YellowArrow fan explained that he recently moved to Somerville and had joined the scavenger hunt Friday night in hopes of finding a sense of community around his new home.

Another participant, Johanna Linsley, is a writer who used YellowArrow to create a game at the subway stop near her house. She planted an initial arrow that lead to a series of arrows underneath a nearby bench, each of which spoke in a different voice. Then last arrow under the bench leads to other arrows attached to a telephone booth, and so on. Linsley says, “I love the idea of there being this human subworld that exists inside this physical space around you.”

Pointing to the Future

The creators of the project came to Boston last weekend bringing the art party with them. After placing arrows around Boston, they planned a party for Friday evening where the arrows would be showcased at an art installation and party.

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In order to find the event, partygoers followed a scavenger hunt through the Boston area lead by the arrows and their accompanying text messages. At the end of the chase, the party came to Central Square's Enormous Room, a suavely hip club identified only by the elephant printed on its door. In the midst of the darkened room flashed the main attraction: a slideshow of forgotten places or overlooked objects reclaimed with bright yellow arrows, historical notes and poetic phrases.

The images included everything from walls covered in graffiti to romantic waterscapes of the Charles. One shot of a van was explained with the simple yet potent, "The man with this van is quite simply the man." Another showed the Brattle movie theatre and states, "The Brattle's been inspiring cultural aficionados for over 100 years.

Original hall was built the same year Groucho Marx was born." As patrons mingled over martinis and beers, some occasionally stared in curiosity or amusement while others stood watching with rapt.

The creators of YellowArrow are coming back to Boston for another round of fun and arrows. The second installation party will be at the Enormous Room (567 Mass. Ave.) at 10 p.m. on Nov. 27.

YellowArrow will be heading to Miami during the Art Basel Festival to curate a festival of their own by placing large light boxes yellow arrow all over the city. Then it's on to Los Angeles to inspire more arrows there.

They also hope to motivate people to hold YellowArrow events of their own: "I think there's a lot of interest in people taking on the project themselves and coordinating maybe with local cultural institutions," says Shapins, "we have this very simple gallery in a box we call it where we can take the database and recast it in a very presentable way that people can gather around and see the artwork displayed."

Ultimately, the project is about you and the arrows. To learn how to place arrows or take a look at the online arrow gallery, visit Yellowarrow.org.

One recent posting shows a late-night Times Square with dazzling lights and larger-than-life advertisements. The message: "Crossroads of the world. Crosscultural Crossword puzzle. Words wash over. Grab 'em, make 'em yours. This is how the story is told."

- Camille I. Johnson