

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Subscribe](#)
- [Photography](#)
- [Français](#)

November 20th, 2010

[Tunnel Vision: Subway Zoetrope](#)

Posted in [Art and Design](#), [Transportation](#), [United States](#), [Video](#) by Christopher Szabla

Bill Brand's "Masstransiscope" installation in New York's subway

I first noticed subway tunnel wall animations in Boston, where the long gaps between stations on the MBTA Red Line provides a captive audience. The animation, composed of dozens of stills that simulated movement as the train zoomed by, was an ad. The message: visit Vermont and its great outdoors, which certainly must have resonated with more than a few claustrophobes riding the crowded rush hour rails.

Animated ads in subway tunnels are expensive, both to design and install, which helps explain why the Vermont ad's successor, a campaign for a movie "coming to theatres" last February, was only removed recently — with no ready replacement. But the medium is a popular one, if only because it's relatively novel and rare. Examples from [Budapest](#), [Hong Kong](#), [Kiev](#), [L.A.](#), [Tokyo](#), and [Washington, D.C.](#) have been enthusiastically documented for upload to YouTube. And given that cash-strapped transit agencies have allowed almost every other subway surface to be colonized by ad space, including seats and whole exteriors of rolling stock, it was almost a logical next step.

Much of the credit for introducing these flipbook or [zoetrope](#)-like ads goes to two independent innovators: New York astrophysics student Joshua Spodek and Winnipeg animator Bradley Caruk. Spodek's ads [debuted in Atlanta in 2001](#); his company, [Sub Media](#), continues to produce similar ads today. In 2006, Caruk [won a Manning Innovation Award](#) for his concept, which his partner, Rob Walker, first thought up while staring at the blank walls of Paris' Metro. The company they co-founded, [SideTrack Technologies](#), set up its first system in Kuala Lumpur and has since opened others across the United States — and beyond, to London, Rio de Janeiro, and cities in Mexico.

Caruk's system, which relies on motion-sensitive LEDs, made subway advertising widespread and profitable. The MBTA raked in \$1.5 million in SideTrack's first two years of operation in Boston, and [one ad alone brought the L.A. Metro the equivalent of 192,000 new riders in revenue](#). But he was hardly the first person to experiment with subway animation.

In 1980, artist Bill Brand set up Masstransiscope, an animated installation in Brooklyn's abandoned Myrtle Ave. station, along the New York subway's B, D, and Q lines. Dim lighting, neglect, and graffiti artists' enthusiasm to add their personal touch to the work all conspired to leave Masstransiscope impossible to make out over the course of a few years. In 2008, though, a subway conductor who was a fan of the work tracked down Brand, who [led the effort to have Masstransiscope restored](#). It's now the subject of dozens of amateur videos, like the one above, and artists elsewhere are working to create their own nonprofit subway animations.

Among them is [Nick Azzaro](#), who sought donations to create an [animated installation](#) called "La Città" along Chicago's Blue Line. At the time of his September deadline, though, Azzaro only managed to raise about 20% of the \$18,000 necessary to bring his work to Blue Line's tunnel walls. That illustrates a serious problem for would-be subway artists: even when they're

not directly competing with advertisers, finding the money necessary to install their work inside a complicated piece of urban infrastructure is difficult.

Of course, creative types have found ways to work in subway tunnels without coughing up fees. A group of celebrated street artists recently [covered a New York subway station](#) — but it was a virtually inaccessible (and invisible) station that had been abandoned for years. Others prefer much more touch-and-go, guerilla interventions vis-a-vis existing underground signs and spaces, as chronicled on New Yorker Joseph Romano's [Subway Art Blog](#). But this work is, in the first case, not public, and, in the second, not permanent enough to constitute a lasting artistic presence in the tunnels.

Transit agencies aren't necessarily primed to help. Many have retrenched from earlier decades' ambitious public art projects, which left a legacy of culturally rich but increasingly dated stations. New York, which has always had a fairly bare-bones subway system bereft of many murals or sculpture, largely left even its pre-recession efforts to restore or maintain its stations' decorative tilework to the support of private institutions — notably, universities like Columbia and NYU, which saw spruced up subway stations as branding tools for themselves and their neighborhoods. It seems unlikely that they would cough up funds for art *between* stations as well.

What the increasing use of subway tunnel ads might do, however, is give transit agencies a revenue cushion large enough to open up the rest of the space in subway cars themselves to artists. New York's MTA currently sponsors an artists' project in some cars, usually displaying fanciful illustrations of subway trains in exotic environments (one, for example, floats above the street, using fire escape stairs as its tracks). Commuters may even be induced to read a view lines (or even stanzas) of poetry. The MTA already supports a "Poetry in Motion" series, although it's so conspicuously sponsored by Barnes & Noble that it may as well be an ad.

But other media could be supported as well, including — thanks to the video monitors increasingly present inside trains from Beijing to Berlin to Shanghai — animation. Riders, after all, could use as much of a break from the [relentless commercial hype bombarding them from these screens](#) as from the monotony of dark tunnel walls. And one advantage of video over the illusion of movement on tunnel walls, powered by a subway train's speed? When, for whatever reason, a train gets stuck in the tunnel, that illusion isn't shattered — and the animation plays on.

Tags: [Advertising](#), [Art Installation](#), [Boston](#), [Chicago](#), [Los Angeles](#), [Metro](#), [New York](#), [Subway](#)

Related Posts

- [Subway Colours, Metro Colours](#)
- [Subway People](#)
- [Underground Art](#)
- [Walk This Way](#)
- [Photo of the Week: Polaroid Commute](#)
- [Everyone's Talking About the Weather](#)
- [Online Shopping in the MTR](#)
- [Time Travel With Nick DeWolf](#)
- [The Reluctant Urban Artist: Anish Kapoor](#)
- [Subway Vigilante](#)

You can skip to the end and leave a comment. Pinging is currently not allowed. [RSS 2.0](#)

Leave a comment

Name (required)

Email (required)

Website